

**The baptist Vision: Narrative Theology and Baptist
Identity in the Thought of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation will investigate the many forms the baptist vision takes in McClendon's work. The baptist vision is a comprehensive theme in McClendon's work and is summarized in the short phrases, "this is that, then is now" in Scripture, and "the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day" (I, 30). It is a typological dynamic, where the biblical text speaks today. The baptist vision is an employment of narrative theology, bringing a set of literary insights such as typology, narratology, catachresis, picture-thinking, grammar, and speech-acts to bear on doctrinal problems and biblical texts. The baptist vision is also a prescription to address problems in baptist identity, such as certain doctrinal issues, as well as questions of origin, unity, and catholicity. In the baptist vision, narrative theology and baptist identity interrelate, mutually enriching each other as the biblical narrative is viewed from a baptist perspective and the baptist identity is re-examined by the biblical narrative. The baptist vision refers to both the way that the biblical narrative is meaningful today and a particular way baptists have identified themselves in that story. These two aspects, while distinct, are mutually dependent and enriching in McClendon's theology.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Theology has a right to the forward look and to the fire of religious vision.”
- Walter Rauschenbusch¹

James Wm. McClendon, Jr.’s work in recent theology has been grossly underappreciated. Yet, William Brackney stated, “All concur that James McClendon is the preeminent progressive Baptist theologian of his era. His work is fresh, compelling, and sometimes theologically mischievous.” In fact, Stanley Hauerwas once hoped that people would “look back on this book [McClendon’s *Systematic Theology*] as the turning point in modern theology.”² This research project attempts to answer the question, “What is the baptist vision in James McClendon’s thought?” So, this project will explore the contributions James Wm. McClendon, Jr., made to narrative theology and baptist identity, which are the two aspects of the baptist vision.

The baptist vision is summarized in the short phrases that “this is that, then is now” in Scripture, and “the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day” (I, 30). The baptist vision refers to both the way that the biblical narrative is meaningful today and a particular way baptists have identified themselves in that story. These two aspects, while distinct, are mutually dependent and enriching in McClendon’s theology. This research project will study the “baptist vision” of James McClendon by examining a range of elements that constitute his unique and complex understanding of Scripture and the Christian community. A summary outline of this study concludes the present chapter. However, to understand its scope, three aspects must be properly introduced: Who was James Wm. McClendon, Jr.? What is narrative theology? And who are the “baptists”? Upon answering these, we will see how they all converge in our topic of study, the “baptist vision.”

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1918), 22.

² I: back cover recommendation (see note on abbreviated citations in bibliography)

1.1 Who Was James Wm. McClendon, Jr.?

In keeping with the biographical emphasis of McClendon's theology, a full theological biography of McClendon's life will be offered as an appendix at the end of this project,³ bringing together several autobiographical works, written memoirs on him by his colleagues and friends, and interviews this researcher conducted. The significance of McClendon's life can be expressed in several shifts in his life, and these reveal, as we will see, that his was a life devoted to Christ no matter the consequences.

Born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1924, McClendon grew up immersed in Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) life. He grew up in a culture with racial segregation, unquestioned military allegiance, and an understanding that the Baptists were the only true Christians. Yet, he also grew up in a culture of strong devotion to Scripture, the latter having the stronger pull when the former was questioned.⁴

He served briefly in World War II. He did not see battle but did see the carnage, which was one step in his journey towards pacifism.⁵ He subsequently received his B.D. at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Th.M. at Princeton, and finally, he returned to Southwestern to complete a doctorate in 1953. After receiving his degree, he taught at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary. He did post-doctoral work in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley and Oxford University, studying with the leading philosophers of language of his day.

³ Much of the biographical material summarized here is found in autobiographical works such as "The Radical Road One Baptist Took" and "A Decade of Dreams: My History Continued, 1969-78," reprinted in CW1 (but the original printing of these papers will sometimes be used); as well as James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "A Brief Narrative Account of My Professional Life and Work to the Present (1969)" (Unpublished autobiographical paper, 1969); James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World" (Note: under the title reads, "talk delivered to 'breakout' session at Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting in Richmond, VA, June/July 1996.").

⁴ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (October 2000): 503.

⁵ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 505.

In his early life he displayed remarkable breadth of intellect, and in the 1960s McClendon was already writing on theology and language, applying Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Austin.

However, at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary McClendon took a stand against the racism and segregation he grew up with. He sent students in support of Martin Luther King, Jr., and due to the growing power of fundamentalism,⁶ McClendon was forced to resign.⁷ After this, he was hired at the Jesuit University of San Francisco, the first non-Catholic professor to teach at a Catholic theological faculty, to his knowledge. While teaching there, he protested the Vietnam War and was again forced to resign.⁸

This placed McClendon in a state of wandering, serving at several universities, and eventually ending up at Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, in 1971. During this time, his intellectual life changed significantly. He started investigating and experimenting with narrative tools for theology, such as biography. Here also he wrote about the nature of religious convictions with James M. Smith, effectively becoming one of the first theologians to move on from modern philosophy. He remained a Baptist, but the atmosphere at Church Divinity School, along with his past experiences teaching at Catholic universities, produced a strong ecumenical awareness, which few Baptists appear to have had at the time.

⁶ See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4–5. “Fundamentalists were evangelical Christians, close to the traditions of the dominant American revivalist establishment of the nineteenth century, who in the twentieth century militantly opposed both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed” (4). While fundamentalism can be defined in generalized terms as any fanatic or regressive mode of convictions—what Marsden sees as “the agonized defense of a dying way of life” (4)—here fundamentalism refers to the historic group or movement in American religious history that rose at the turn of the 20th century in reaction to modern theology. This was a movement that, while it affected other denominations, was particularly felt in Baptist circles.

⁷ McClendon, “On Being a Baptist,” par. 7.

⁸ McSwain and Allen’s book reports this as an urged resignation. See Graham B. Walker, “James McClendon (1924–2000): Theologian of the Ethical Stance,” in Larry L. McSwain and Wm. Loyd Allen, eds., *Twentieth-Century Shapers of Baptist Social Ethics* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 101 and more broadly 99–119.

In 1974, he read John Howard Yoder, whose book, *The Politics of Jesus*, led him to a self-professed second conversion. His convictions shifted to include the Anabaptists in with his Baptist identity, and his pacifism fully emerged. He then set out to revision Baptist identity, now “baptist” with a small “b.”⁹ Shortly afterward, he set out to write his magnum opus, a three-volume *Systematic Theology*, which took him nearly twenty years to complete. In 1990, he moved to teach at Fuller Theological Seminary with his wife, Nancey Murphy, herself a brilliant Anabaptist theologian and philosopher of science.¹⁰

In the late 1990s he was a part of a controversial group that proposed the “Baptist Manifesto” (1997), a confession for moderate Baptists. McClendon was active during these debates but his health was failing. In 2000, due to congestive heart failure, he died, literally moments after seeing an advance copy of the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*.¹¹

His career shows several significant shifts: from uncritical support of war to pacifism, from being raised with racial segregation to becoming an advocate for civil rights, from being an Southern Baptist to including Anabaptism in his self-identity, from exclusion to ecumenism, etc. His thought is connected with several major theological movements such as narrative theology and postliberalism¹² (the two being intertwined), the flowering of Anabaptist theology (with Yoder), the recovery of virtue ethics (with Hauerwas and MacIntyre), and finally, recognizing

⁹ McClendon, “The Radical Road One Baptist Took,” 508.

¹⁰ Nancey Murphy, “Foreword,” in CW1, xi.

¹¹ Murphy, “Foreword,” in CW1, xii–xiii.

¹² There are probably several possible definitions for this word, but we might define it as a movement or conversation in American theology, centered predominantly but not exclusively at Yale Divinity School, beginning with the work of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, who sought ways of moving beyond the polarization of liberalism and fundamentalism by retrieving what they thought were genuine linguistic and narrative insights from the Christian tradition. Lindbeck offers some explanation as to what postliberal theology means which is similar to this definition, in George Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), ch. 6: “A postliberal might propose to overcome this polarization between tradition and innovation by a distinction between abiding doctrinal grammar and variable theological vocabulary, but this proposal appears from other perspectives as the worst of two worlds rather than the best of both” (113). McClendon was developing his own ideas before these thinkers, thus constituting a different center of this kind of thought, but also did adopt their work, especial in *Doctrine*.

what is called the postmodern shift. He called for renewed thinking on the doctrines of the Trinity, eschatology, salvation, ecclesiology, and baptism. He interacted with the “death of God” theologians, process theologians, and neo-orthodoxy, all to find his own voice. As we will see, his theology, while some parts are not tenable, does not lack in originality and honesty in confronting difficult doctrinal tasks.

Thus, to study McClendon’s theology is not only to understand a mind of profound brilliance and dynamism, but also personal integrity. His convictions cost him his job twice, yet he produced a theology of remarkable ingenuity in the way that only a life of spiritual sojourning can form.

1.2 What Is Narrative Theology?

A narrative theology is any theology that is self-conscious and methodical about reflecting upon the narrated dimension of the Bible, the believer’s or church’s life, or a doctrinal truth, sometimes involving the application of literary and linguistic theories and insights. McClendon saw narrative theology as an attempt to free Christian theology from the Enlightenment’s attempt to strip theological truth from the biblical narrative. He writes,

These past decades have seen so many kinds of theological styles and trends: “death of God theology,” the theology of play and so on. They had their day and then faded away. To many, narrative theology was just one more technique for doing the same old thing. But for others of us, the deeper concerns had to do with a growing awareness that in the course of the Enlightenment there had been a consistent attempt to de-narrativize the content of religion. [...] Enlightenment thinkers spoke of narratives as myths, by which they didn’t mean anything complimentary. Their idea was to have a theology that was rational, based upon firm, self-evident philosophical foundations, and quite free of the stories that the Bible told. Those stories might illustrate the true theology, they might even exemplify it, but they couldn’t be it. So the Enlightenment was a time in which the narrative character of human existence was reduced to secondary status. (CW1, 307–8)

As a movement of thinkers predominantly situated in North American theology, and particularly as something that McClendon participated in, narrative theology has its distinct influences and proponents.¹³ For purposes of definition, a very brief description follows.

Karl Barth is often understood as the primary inspiration of most narrative theologians. His emphasis on the three-fold Word of God—incarnate, written, and then preached—refocused theology back on revelation in the church. Moreover, over the course of writing his mammoth *Church Dogmatics*, Barth wrote with increasing sensitivity about the narrated history of God’s revealed identity in Christ.¹⁴

H. Richard Niebuhr in America also wrote about the narrative crafting of the history of revelation. According to him, history has two aspects, inner and outer.¹⁵ Scripture offers an inner history, not contemplated from the outside in a supposedly objective manner, but within the community, in all the biblical narrative’s subjectivity of faith. Similar to McClendon’s claim that the Bible offers its truth to the present in a “this is that” manner, revelation, for Niebuhr, is an ongoing reality, “which happens over and over again when we remember the illuminating center of our history.”¹⁶

In the 1970s McClendon became interested in narrative categories because of his interest in biographies. In *Biography as Theology*, McClendon was interested in how biblical images were embodied in people’s life stories, and he explored this issue using the work of Anglican philosophical theologian, Austin Farrer, who saw the inspired character of Scripture in its

¹³ For one summary, see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), ch. 9.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1936–1969). His doctrine of the Word of God is the first volume, but his narrative rendering of Christology is in IV.1 § 59 & IV.2 § 64. Also David Ford, *Barth and God’s Story* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 59.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 132, 177.

typological images.¹⁷ McClendon also notes Stephen Crites' influential essay, pointing out the narrative structure of human experience, an insight that McClendon expands and reworks throughout his career.¹⁸ At this time, McClendon also corresponded with Stanley Hauerwas regarding the recovery of virtue ethics and narrative.¹⁹ Hauerwas argued for the importance of a narrative logic for qualifying ethical character as well as the necessity of a communal site for reading the narrative.

In 1974, McClendon published *Convictions* with James Smith, an atheist, interacting with Austin²⁰ and Wittgenstein,²¹ analyzing the language of what he calls "convictions" (a technical term which will be defined in full later), and noting that convictions for Christians are bundled in narratives, which are lived out (as he demonstrated in BT). As we will see, while not "narrative" per se, both Wittgensteinian grammar and Austin's theory of speech-acts are linguistic categories narrative theologians have used to analyze doctrines holistically.²² This work marks a decisive shift away from modernistic thinking towards new models of language and epistemology, rooted in the nature of Scripture's narrative and the community of practice it forms.

By the time McClendon had written the first volume of his trilogy in 1984, *Ethics*, he had proposed his own contribution to narrative theology beyond his work on biography: the "baptist vision." This he summarized in the phrase, "this is that" (after Acts 2:16 in the KJV). This was a holistic account of typological meaning in the biblical narrative. By his second volume,

¹⁷ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948).

¹⁸ Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Sept. 1971): 291–311.

¹⁹ See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1974); *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); *Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

²⁰ See his primary text, J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

²¹ See his primary text, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

²² For example, see Paul Holmer, *Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); George Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Doctrine, he began to utilize Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Frei proposed that before the Enlightenment, the Bible was read typologically and realistically (terms that will be defined in detail in this research project).²³ The Enlightenment had made a misstep in seeing the meaningfulness of Scripture as lying in the history behind it rather than in the Scriptures' own narrative presentation in the text itself. George Lindbeck, in a way similar to McClendon's conclusions on convictions, argued for a new view of doctrine called the "cultural-linguistic" approach (relying heavily on Wittgenstein), which looked at doctrine not as mere propositions of timeless truths or symbolic expressions of a universal human experience, but as particular beliefs that govern and construct the experience of a community, much like grammar functions in a particular language.

While Yale University served as the center of this movement, housing and educating theologians such as Niebuhr, Frei, Lindbeck, and Hauerwas, the divinity schools in Berkeley, where McClendon taught, became another center for narrative theology due to his influence. There he taught several influential thinkers: Michael Goldberg,²⁴ a Jewish theologian, who wrote on critical issues on the use of narrative; Terence Tilley,²⁵ a Catholic theologian, who wrote *Storied Theology*, one of the first full treatises on the subject; and Ched Myers,²⁶ an Anabaptist peace-advocate, whose commentary on Mark showed a powerful combination of literary and political insight. Berkeley also housed the literary critic, Robert Alter, with whom McClendon interacted. Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* noted the literary devices the Bible employs to

²³ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

²⁴ Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

²⁵ Terrence Tilley, *Story Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985),

²⁶ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008).

present its history which add substantial meaningfulness often missed by historical-critical methods.²⁷

By the 1990s McClendon worried that the narrative theology movement was at risk of becoming a fad (III, 350), but insisted that because Scripture and life are both story-shaped, the school did offer enduring insight. In *Doctrine*, McClendon offers his own expanded description of a narrative investigation in theology:

if we think of the Bible as a single, great story, united by characters, setting, and plot (to be sure, that single story is a bundle of stories, and non-narrative material punctuates the text as well, but here we simplify), we may describe the church's Bible-reading task as the **identification** of its **characters** (major and minor), the **discovery** of its **plot** (and its subplots), and the **exploration** of its **setting** (through its many scenes). Undertaking this complex task brings us, centrally, to the question about the identity of Jesus Christ and (through that) to the identities of God and God's people the Jews, and of Christians, and of the rest who people Scripture's pages. It brings us to the plot-line of salvation and the creation of this people. It brings us to the kingdom or rule of God as the overarching setting into which we enter this story. [As well as]...two vital but sometimes unspoken participants in the text—the **narrator** and the **hearers**. The biblical narrator, the ultimate giver of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is God. ...And who are the hearers, the readers? It was said above that the church reads the Bible. (II, 40–41, boldface emphasis his)

For McClendon, narrative theology is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a way to carefully and productively read Scripture. He sought to have Christian theology grounded in the biblical narrative, in the way the narrative suggests that its own story be read, within the community the story forms. As we will see, critics have raised several questions about narrative approaches: does a narrative approach undermine the historical claims of Scripture? With an emphasis on narrative, how does one choose between competing interpretations? Can a narrative theology be faithful to the traditions of Christian theology that preceded it? Does the emphasis on narrative de-actualize God, trapping him in language? Does narrative theology condemn the

²⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

thinker to fideism or can it demonstrate its reality to others? Finally, can a narrative emphasis actually offer constructive insight into classic theological problems? We will take up these questions and others in the subsequent chapters.

1.3 Who Are the “baptists”?

A standard definition of Baptists (with a capital “B”) is found in the beloved acrostic, BAPTIST: B (believer’s baptism), A (autonomy of the local church), P (primacy of Scripture), T (true believers in the church), I (individual competency and believer priesthood), S (separation of church and state), T (two ordinances).²⁸ Baptists, typically, are thought to be a denomination of Protestantism (or set of denominations) that began with John Smyth in Britain, Roger Williams in America, and others. As we will see, Baptists constitute a theological group of formidable size and influence, but one that also faces controversy as to its origins, unity, and future. The following are some of the conflicts that are relevant to McClendon’s context.

The largest denomination of this theological heritage is the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States,²⁹ a convention that became separate from its Northern counterpart in 1845, splitting over the issue of whether a missionary can own slaves (and slavery in general), the SBC defending slavery on strict biblical grounds. McClendon grew up in a culture of segregation that the SBC nursed due to its side in this conflict.

In the middle of the twentieth century, another significant conflict occurred between liberals and conservatives. Eventually, the fundamentalist movement in the SBC gained significant power, succeeding in removing and replacing many of the liberal and moderate

²⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 82.

²⁹ For full history see Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

members who held positions in SBC universities and denominational committees.³⁰ In the 1950s, McClendon had to resign because of his suspected liberalism, displayed in his support for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights movement. In the subsequent years the SBC saw an ongoing power struggle between liberals, moderates, and conservatives. The SBC has been the battleground of arguments over fundamentalism and liberalism, biblical inerrancy and historical criticism, racial segregation and civil rights, and a plethora of other doctrinal issues from creationism to women's ordination. This polarization between liberals and fundamentalists left many moderates looking for another way.

Meanwhile, there was a growing awareness amongst moderates that the older ways in which Baptists thought about their identity no longer worked. Baptists were not a clandestine, "true" church traceable back to Jesus, recovered explicitly in the Reformation. Baptists were not the only Christians, but one group among many. Moreover, claims of superiority were tempered by the realities of schism, isolation, and fragmentation amongst the churches. Thus, it had to be asked: What makes Baptists unique if they are not the only true authentic Christians? How were Baptists connected with other Christians? Was there a way beyond the polarity of liberalism and fundamentalism? Was there a way beyond the pitfalls of biblical inerrancy and the historical-critical approach? Was there an ecclesial platform that could be used to work toward unity and cooperation rather than continue fragmentation? In these concerns, McClendon perceived a crisis that he attempted to respond to.

McClendon in the 1970s came to be deeply influenced by the work of John Howard Yoder, and saw Anabaptists to be a part of his own now "baptist," small "b," identity. He saw

³⁰ For an anthology of people's testimonies of the takeover, see Carl Kell, ed. *Exiled: Voices of the Southern Baptist Convention Holy War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006). For a historical account and the primary documents of the takeover, see Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary history of the SBC Holy War* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996).

these two groups as loosely connected and he saw their futures linked, offering a model to unify all free churches. Thus, his *Systematic Theology* shows a synthesis of the two groups' convictions. It seems that in Anabaptism McClendon saw the emphasis on ethical character, pacifism, shared community life, and typological reading, a synthesis that might offer another way in the midst of liberal-fundamentalist polarization. This identity was organized around the "baptist vision," the typological practice of all free-church communities who see their convictions centered in the Bible, liberty, community, discipleship, and mission.

Curtis Freeman described McClendon's effort as the first to do theology in a specifically baptist way, that is, the first to truly think through the implications for doing theology as a baptist.³¹ We see McClendon's baptist vision as intertwined with typological practice and ecclesial crisis. While we shall see that McClendon's proposal is not without problems, the praise he has garnered is well earned.

1.4 Thesis and Chapter Summary

As already stated, *the baptist vision, as the most important theme in McClendon's theology, refers to both the way that the biblical narrative is meaningful today and a particular way baptists have identified themselves in that story. These two aspects, while distinct, are mutually dependent and enriching in McClendon's theology, which is displayed in productive reflection on theological and ecclesial issues.*

The first part of this project, Chapters Two and Three, looks at the beginning of McClendon's narrative thinking. Chapter Two explores his earliest work on biography and convictions and sees his baptist vision emerging from how believers' stories embody Scripture's story. In his work on biography we also first encounter several issues in his vision: the nature of

³¹ Curtis W. Freeman, "Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and other Baptists," in I, xxxvii.

baptist identity and how the biblical narrative is lived out in the present. Chapter Three, perhaps the most foundational chapter of this project, investigates the nature of typological reading and baptist identity. It offers a set of rules that McClendon provides throughout his work to govern typological reading and examines the unique baptist character of such a practice.

The second group of chapters looks at narrative dimensions of doctrine in the baptist vision. Chapter Four, “A Three-Strand Story,” describes the mechanics of narrative that gives reality to the baptist vision and how these strands offer an ontology that structures McClendon’s theology and ethics. Chapter Five, “Storied Systematics,” studies McClendon’s narrative approach to the doctrine of God. This chapter will look at how the baptist vision describes how Christ is known in the church and how Christology is constructed, and then moves one to explore how Christ’s identity can be organized into “two-narratives.” Finally, this chapter describes how the doctrine of the Trinity shows the character of God encountered in the biblical narrative and community life. Chapter Six will focus on how McClendon’s baptist vision uses signs as a way in which the pattern of the biblical narrative is remembered and reconstituted in the present. It will look at how the historic signs of God culminate in Christ, the “sign of signs,” and, finally, how these are remembered in the church. Since the remembering sign of preaching is a figural doctrinal practice, the chapter will also explore how McClendon offers figural reorientations of different doctrines, showing the temporal dimensions of the baptist vision.

The third group of chapters catalogues the different literary tools McClendon uses to clarify biblical texts and doctrinal topics. Chapter Seven discusses tools for reading biblical texts, which include metaphor, catachresis (the latter being a specific aspect of the former) as well as what McClendon calls “picture-thinking.” The use of these tools will clarify texts in the doctrines of creation, atonement, salvation, and eschatology, showing how imagery and events

form a “this is that, then is now” structure. Chapter Eight considers how the baptist vision organizes religious convictions in to what is called “grammar” and also by seeing convictions as speech acts. Both show how the text becomes contemporaneous with the reader in the way the baptist vision requires.

The fourth part addresses problems that we will observe in the other chapters, notably the issues of historicity, baptist identity, and catholicity. Chapter Nine answers a nagging question about the narrative emphasis of Scripture: did it actually happen? McClendon has two ways of understanding the meaning of Scripture assumed in the baptist vision. The first moves from historical reference to realistic narration; the second sees Scripture as the instrument of the Spirit’s speech-acts (thus, continuing the reflection on speech-acts from the previous chapter) to the church, who reads within the practices of baptist communities. The baptist vision presupposes an ecclesial identity as the site of readership, and Chapter Ten will examine McClendon’s definition of “baptist.” It will assess the proposal as a prescription to all free-church believers but specifically to moderate Southern Baptists (his home tradition), where it became a subject of intense debate around the “Baptist Manifesto” in 1997. The vision presupposes a loose connection to Anabaptists, appropriating several of their convictions in McClendon’s theology. The proposal is as complex and precarious, as it is needed in the midst of baptist fragmentation. Chapter Eleven moves on to the issue of catholicity and tradition. McClendon proposes a baptist strategy of catholicity using the baptist vision and other accompanying convictions. This strategy attempts to show how baptists can claim to be authentic to what God calls them to without claims of superiority or exclusivity in their relations with other Christian traditions.

Finally, in the conclusion (Chapter Twelve) we will summarize the successes and criticisms of each topic presented in each chapter. Honouring his commitment to biography in theology, after this follows an appendix that offers a full biographical description of McClendon's life. This was undertaken because if McClendon did not live a Christ-like life, by his own criteria, his theology would be unsuccessful. Thus, investigating his biography is a precondition for this research project. Also, linked with Chapter Ten, we include an appendix examining the historical connection between Baptists and Anabaptists. McClendon's "baptist" identity does not require a tangible historical connection in order to draw Baptists and Anabaptists together or to recommend Anabaptist insights to Baptists. So, this section offers important historical background, but is somewhat tangential.

This dissertation will investigate the many forms the baptist vision takes in McClendon's work. The baptist vision is both an employment of narrative theology, bringing a set of literary tools and insights to bear on doctrinal problems and biblical texts, as well as a set of ecclesial convictions related to who Baptists (and more broadly "baptists") see themselves to be. As we will see, in the baptist vision narrative theology and baptist identity interrelate, mutually enriching each other. Baptist community provides a site for readership, a tradition of convictions, doctrinal issues, and a terminus for interpretation; meanwhile, narrative approaches offer clarity about the language of faith and insight into how the Bible is composed—things that baptists take no small interest in. This thesis is a multifaceted one, as not all of McClendon's assertions are impeccable. Not all baptist distinctives are transformed by a narrative approach, and certainly not all narrative insights are seen only by baptist eyes. Nevertheless, at the end of this work, we will see that Stanley Hauerwas' assertion—that McClendon's theology is a turning point for modern theology—is warranted. McClendon's work is original and commendable.

Chapter 2: Beginning with Biography

“Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represent you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.”

“We might lose everything too, Bob.”

“It’s different for you.”

“Why is it different...?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

“Could that point by any chance be—the cross?”

“That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

“Then I don’t believe you are a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.”

“Well no, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

“The question,” Clarence said, “is, ‘Do you have a church?’”

- Conversation between Bob Jordan with his brother, Clarence, when Bob was asked to legally represent Koinonia Church¹

Seeking to explore the baptist vision has many avenues of inquiry, but there is perhaps only one suitable beginning for McClendon’s thought: biography. The initial insight McClendon offered in his early works, *Biography as Theology* as well as what was later republished as *Convictions*, for communicating and transforming doctrine was through a unified understanding of living Scripture as it is embodied in the convictions of exemplary individuals of a faith community. The central insight of the biographical approach, and perhaps of McClendon’s entire project, is the integration of Bible and life in narrative: “This is that.” The biblical narrative is to be embodied *now*. He once said that his work makes plain the “need for a *theology* of character: the problems of ethics lead to the problems of theology and back again” (BT, 14). In order to appreciate this insight further, we will explain his approach within the general context of the writing of biography; then we will look at how McClendon developed his unique approach, its central insights and criteria, the certain concerns surrounding its methodology, and how it relates to the baptist vision.

¹ In BT, 121–22.

This chapter will examine the use of biography as a legitimate narrative form for theological inquiry. In order to do this, we will delineate the context, terms, and criteria for the biographical method; and we will show the connection and mutual enrichment of the biographical approach with the baptist vision. It is in biography that McClendon first begins to think about the “this is that” dynamic that would later become the baptist vision.

2.1 What Is a Biography?

First, we must define what a biography is. How and why does a person write one? Biography is the study of an exemplary life, which for McClendon means specifically reflection upon a radical believer’s convictions, authentic to how they held them, and reflection within a community of shared convictions.

Here a short prelude on biography will help us understand McClendon’s achievement: McClendon recognizes the innately “contested” nature of our stories and how we tell our stories (III: chap. 9). Robert Gittings, an important biographer of Keats and Shakespeare, offered his reflections on the method of biography, saying, “The nature of biography is to be, within formal limits, infinitely adaptable.”² There is no such thing as a general method for biography. There are historiographical methods to ensure reliable collection of data.³ However, biography, it seems, can be as diverse as the people whose stories it tells and the people who craft these stories. “A biography is a record, in words, of something that is as mercurial and as flowing, as compact of

² Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 68.

³ See Thomas Elliot Berry, *The Biographer’s Craft* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1967), 1–19. Berry offers a general account of understanding the subject, the subject’s world, and understanding the biographer’s literary ability, purpose in writing, materials used and collected, ethical considerations, form of writing, and other particularities. Berry after the introduction offers an anthology of different biographies through history to illustrate the diversity of the genre. Also see Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), an extended set of lectures on biographical craft as a philosophical methodology of choosing a subject, investigating all the data, interpreting it, and crafting a biography. For a more detailed account on methodology for biographies on present-day individuals and their family history, see Robert L. Miller, *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2000).

temperament and emotion, as the human spirit itself.”⁴ Biographies are inherently particular and diverse.

Historically, we see biographies being written for various purposes.⁵ “Know thyself, the philosopher said; and the biographer seems to say also ‘Understand thy neighbor and thou wilt know thyself.’”⁶ One of the earliest examples, apart from the gospels, is Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*,⁷ a set of biographies on famous Greek and Roman men. The purpose of this form of biography is to illustrate good and bad character. We should note that this is “good” and “bad” character according to Greek and Roman religion, culture, and community. For instance, we should note that such “good” character for this culture often meant a proficiency in war that was of a decidedly higher value than what a Christian might see in it, but nevertheless, this biography has a pedagogical intent. So, biographies resemble the communities that reflect on certain lives often for the purpose of imitating that life. Gittings offers a short history of the genre:

It would seem that biography, first looking on man as an adjunct to religious example and precept of moral conduct, a part of the prevailing Church, then as an ornament to the prevailing State, an example of civic, secular virtues, has gradually come to portray as its subject the individual man or woman. It has been a movement towards humanism, and may take its place, and account for its own popularity, as a humanistic study.⁸

Gittings points out how the purpose of the biographer and the biographer’s community shape the nature of the biography. With the rise of biography as a modern genre, we see its “infinite adaptability” express itself in other ways.

We seem to have arrived at a notable point when present life itself is enlarged and enriched by what we read about past lives. Biography has attained more than respectability as a study. It is even academically recognized, in many schools and colleges.... Biography is

⁴ Edel, *Literary Biography*, 1.

⁵ For a history of biography see Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965).

⁶ Edel, *Literary Biography*, 104

⁷ Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, 2 vols., trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough (Toronto: Random House, 2001).

⁸ Gittings, *Nature of Biography*, 39–40.

still highly individualistic in concern. One cannot lay down rules or formulate aesthetic judgments. Every biography is a matter between the biographer and subject, each one highly personal.⁹

Thus, there are unfortunate expressions of biography. Some forms reveal what biographies look like when there is a disparity between the beliefs of the subject of the biography and those of the biographer. For example, the genre of “psychobiography” often attempts to narrate a person’s life through psychological mechanisms or minute childhood experiences in such a way that can sometimes become reductionistic to the events of the person’s life.¹⁰ In not giving close attention or credence to the religious dimensions of a person’s life (e.g., whether they did in fact believe they were encountered by God and changed their vocation accordingly), religious biography, in these cases, becomes de-particularized into a more humanistic question of self-improvement.

There have been noteworthy critiques that say scholars must pay closer attention to a person’s convictions and how they shape personal history. In historiography, some evangelical scholars have pointed out that to filter a person’s religious convictions through psychologized frameworks lacks methodological integrity. Brad S. Gregory, for instance, writes,

the endeavor to see things their way is the antithesis of the endeavor that takes a reductionist, (post)modern theory of religion and applies it to the evidence. Certainly, scholars are free to believe whatever they wish about God, religion, faith, religion and politics, and so forth. But if they want to understand other religious people on their own terms, they must as a matter of methodological necessity set their own views aside, which implies the self-awareness just mentioned.¹¹

⁹ Gittings, *Nature of Biography*, 92.

¹⁰ A famous example of this would be Erik Erikson’s work, *Young Man Luther*, where Luther’s reformation was not carried out because of his legitimate convictions of being called to reform the church by God, but because of certain rebellious tendencies Luther had projected onto the church from his relationship with his father. See Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962). A similar example is found in the methodological work of Richard Hutch. For Hutch, all religious biography offers a trans-traditional quest for a “trajectory of personal realization” whose ultimate goal is for the reader to be equipped for everyday “self-reliance.” Richard Hutch, *The Meaning of Lives: Biography, Autobiography, and the Religious Quest* (Cassel: London, 1997), 152–53.

¹¹ Brad S. Gregory, “Can We ‘See Things Their Way’? Should We Try?” in *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, eds. Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (Notre Dame:

One might wonder, however, if this perspective is sustainable in the face of a pluralism of convictions. To remember Gittings' advice, biography has to be limited or selective or else it is overwhelmed by the vast quantity of data.¹² That selectiveness has to be supplied, at least in part, by the biographer and his or her community. The more aware of this fact a biographer is the better. Can an evangelical historian treat the religious experiences of Saint Paul and Mohammed with the same level of authenticity, without making a judgment call? The biographer's convictions can and do influence, and even aid or impede, the biographer.

It seems that for McClendon, biography is as particular as his ecclesiology and the subjects he researches. In other words, McClendon's work does not offer a generalized, psychologized, or structuralized account of biography. It is one that is done by a biographer who writes from a certain convictional community, for the purposes of that community, about a person that existed or was relevant to those same convictions. In this way, McClendon's biographical theology is an important step in his break with modernity and his false confidence in objective reason.

So, we see that McClendon developed this biographical approach, which has three aspects. The first aspect is that a biographical approach arose from his Baptist upbringing, which emphasized testimony.

Incidentally, narrative, which I had first learned at First Baptist in Shreveport by singing "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" and "God Be with You Till We Meet Again" ("Till we me-ee-eet, till we me-eet, till we meet at Je-ee-su-us' feet")—the long narration of God's way with humanity and the lesser narratives that comprised that long one—this narration now

University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 42. Also see, John Fea, Jay Green, Eric Miller, eds., *Confessing History* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

¹² Gittings warns of modernistic or scientific approaches where "The sheer weight of evidence now available to the biographer does not necessarily make a successful biography"! Gittings, *Nature of Biography*, 68.

found its way into my pedagogy in a degree well beyond the received systematics of the Baptist seminaries.¹³

The second aspect is that the approach was developed in the classroom. It was at the Jesuit University of San Francisco that McClendon's biographical approach was born. Its creation was not as a theological method, but a pedagogical one, used in order to introduce his Catholic students to Protestant thought. Barth's voluminous writings proved unhelpful for students in his ethics classes (I, 7).

Only by narrating American religious history, I discovered, could I provide a contact point between myself, my Catholic students, our partially shared past, and their own 1960's quests. So courses followed in which Roger Williams, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Charles Grandison Finney, and a notebook full of lesser men and women took center stage. The road to theology for these students lay through biography.¹⁴

This began a lifelong pursuit of writing biographies for theological purposes. In the table on the next page, we see all the published biographies McClendon wrote:¹⁵

¹³ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World" (Note: under the title reads, "talk delivered to 'breakout' session at Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting in Richmond, VA, June/July 1996"), paragraph 1. Paragraphs are used for citations, as there is no pagination.

¹⁴ McClendon, "On Being a Baptist," par. 9.

¹⁵ Now, it should be noted that there are a lot of smaller biographical instances in McClendon's work, which do not display the depth of research of his official larger biographies, yet retell the stories in brief of Christian convictions. For instance, McClendon locates himself in the space of baptist moderates such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Edgar Young Mullins, Walter Thomas Connor, Georgia Harkness (in II, 57–61). He uses Hans Hut to illustrate baptist eschatological convictions, Ambrose of Milan as a negative example of treatment of the Jews, and Roger Williams for typological scriptural authority. In *Witness*, with his wife Nancey Murphy, he discusses the life work of Charles Darwin, pointing out misconceptions about faith and science (III, 106–15). After that, he discusses American artists, novelists, and musicians, showing how their work displays certain religious convictions, whether well or poorly (III, 140–78). Similarly, he recounts the lives of Augustine and Descartes (III, 191–99, 208–11) as examples of minds that used the philosophy of their day in their theology.

McClendon's Biographies (in order of publishing date)		
<i>Person (Lifespan), Citation</i>	<i>Life Events/Description</i>	<i>Convictions and Images</i>
Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), BT, Ch. 2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Swedish diplomat - Secretary General of the UN - died in a plane crash - had a profound mystical spirituality 	Profound “twice-born” ¹⁶ burden for the world; a tormented commitment to self-examination; relational Trinitarian mysticism
Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), BT, Ch. 3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - African-American Baptist pastor and civil rights activist - known for his Montgomery Bus Boycott and March on Washington - assassinated in Memphis 	Exodus-style liberation for black people; the nonviolent, loving way of the cross as means of liberation, with the cost of suffering
Clarence Jordan (1912–1969), BT, Ch. 5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New Testament scholar and farmer - founded Koinonia farm - produced the Cotton Patch Bible - was persecuted for his efforts to achieve racial equality 	Incarnational community, racial equality
Charles Edward Ives (1874–1954), BT, Ch. 6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - American modernist composer - influenced by Transcendentalism 	Convictions displayed in music; longing for deeper religion; influence of church hymns in experimental music ¹⁷
Jonathan (1703–1758) and Sarah Edwards (1710–1758), I, Ch. 4.	Jonathan Edwards: influential American Reformed theologian	Faith as more than disembodied intellect; love of God in a harsh world connected to love of one's spouse despite life's difficulties
Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), I, Ch. 7.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - German Lutheran pastor, theologian, Anti-Nazi dissident - co-founder of the confessing church; imprisoned, later executed, for aiding resistance to Hitler 	The role of Christian community in Bonhoeffer's pacifism and decision to aid resistance (a decision McClendon interprets as a backslide)
Dorothy Day (1897–1980), I, Ch. 10.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Socialist journalist, converted to Catholicism; pacifist - established Catholic Worker Mvmt. 	Longing for the kingdom of heaven on earth; Christian pacifism; socialism
Balthasar Hubmaier (1480–1528), CW1, 269–83	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Early Anabaptist leader, theologian - executed by torture, public burning 	Baptist and Catholic convictions
John Howard Yoder (1927–1997) ¹⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Studied under Bender, Barth - leading Mennonite historian, ethicist, and theologian 	Anabaptist identity, pacifism, etc.
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), III, Ch. 6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eccentric philosophical genius - associated with the rise of analytic philosophy, especially in the areas of logic, language, and meaning 	Had a passionate, albeit peculiar and private, Christian faith that undergirded his philosophical inquiries

¹⁶ This phrase comes from the psychology of William James, whom McClendon uses to interpret some of Hammarskjöld's experience. This would be one of the few instances of McClendon using generalized psychological categories in his biographies.

¹⁷ This biography is the most bizarre of the four in BT. While Hammarskjöld, King, and Jordan were practicing Christians, living out active displays of redemption, Ives' faith seems to be displayed predominantly artistically in a mode of religious yearning. We see this type of biographical analysis in *Witness* as McClendon analyzes the convictions of painters, writers, and musicians, again seeing their artistic and literary works as products or displays of their subtle convictions.

¹⁸ McClendon, “John Howard Yoder: One of Our Own, 1927–1997,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25.1 (Spr. 1998): 21–26. This is largely a professional biography summarizing the theological and ethical work of Yoder. It does not comment on theological meaning of the moral failures of Yoder's life.

2.2 The Context and Key Terms

What is the context of McClendon's early work? In order to better understand the central insights of the biographical approach, there are major questions and key definitions that must be answered and defined.

1. *The Context*: We must understand that the theological milieu that the biographical approach took shape in was that of Niebuhrian ethics that undermined character and narrative. When *Biography as Theology* came out it criticized the dominant approaches of its day and offered an alternative ethical theory. The dominant approaches to ethics of the 1960s and early 1970s were utilitarianism, the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher, quandary ethics, and the realism of Reinhold Niebuhr.

While we do not have the space to define all these approaches, all of them shared a common weakness: the reduction of ethics to principles, conscientiousness, and decisions, which neglected the narrative of character formed in community. Often, as he argued, ethical action is not done as a conscientious decision, nor is it done according to methodical rational principles, but is far more instantaneous and intuitive (BT, 22). It happens as a result of character and virtue.

2. *Key Terms*: Thus, in critiquing these ethical approaches, McClendon delineated the fundamental concepts of a narrative "character-in-community" based ethic. Ethical action, analyzed in the work of *theology*, is the result of *character*, something previously and continuously formed in and by the *convictions* of a person living in a convictional community (BT, 31). These terms require definition.

Character: Character is the moral formation of a person as well as a description of their moral action. It is paradoxically the "cause and consequence of what we do" (BT, 31). Character is the precondition of choices (BT, 30). There is good and bad character.

Virtue: Good character culminates in virtues, which are “excellences or skills enabling us to enjoy the to full or fulfill the elements of the embodied moral life” (I, 114). However, these do not come “naturally.” Virtue requires training and practice. Character is “typified nature” (BT, 29), but it is linguistic in nature. This means that character is a kind of ordering of a person’s biological make-up in order to perform a certain way. All humans have basic moral equipment. McClendon delineates delight and horror, shame, blame, and guilt, as well as conscience and judgment in his writings. These get interpreted, structured, practiced, and enhanced by social forces, and in particular, by community.

Community takes many forms, but it must be a narrative-formed community. The stories people tell, the memories and traditions they share, the history that they receive and modify by their own lives and pass on to their children—these are the carriers of social value. (I, 177)

Thus, character is formed in the culture of a community that offers encouragement (for virtues) and discouragement (of vices) and the intelligibility of both by foundational images and convictions wrapped in narratives.

Convictions: Convictions, unlike rational principles, are “tenacious beliefs,” so much so that if they were surrendered the person or community would be decisively different (BT, 34). In other words, convictions are more than just beliefs residing in people’s brains. Convictions are lived. They are what people build their lives on. “Convictions may be distinguished from opinions: men stake money on opinions...but they have been known to stake their lives on convictions” (BT, 34).

But it is important to note that often we are unaware of our deepest convictions.¹⁹ “Our convictions can be suppressed, they may be hidden from ourselves, but it is the true business of

¹⁹ This would seem to insinuate that a person may not consciously believe, for instance, that he or she is a consumer, but in fact, live those convictions out unknowingly in their mindless, consuming habits.

words to reveal, and every conviction is in principle expressible” (BT, 194–95). This does not mean they cannot be changed. Convictions are as fallible as the finite humans that hold them. Often our convictions are problematic and in need of reform. This is the work of the practice of theology.

Theology: Whether done personally, pastorally, or in its more professional form, theology as a science of “theory organizing a body of data” is appropriate in the right context (I, 38). However, more generally, it is not merely the study of God, for there are ungodly theologies out there (BT, 35). Theology is, generally defined, the science of convictions: “It is the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is” (I, 23).

One might find this definition overly generalized, but we should keep in mind three intentions behind this definition. (1) McClendon intends to show that all systems of thought, whether Christian, atheist, or otherwise, are in fact religious, laden with convictions. (2) By leveling the playing field, he hopes that Christians will be able to authentically reflect on their own convictions without correlating them to foreign epistemological concerns. Convictions are irreducibly particular to the people and the communities that hold them. Theologians, for example, while ostensibly more theoretical and academic, nevertheless, in order to be “Christian” or “baptist” theologians, must belong in some way to a community. Often theologians are joined by a communally recognized vocation and supported by the institutions of that community. That is not to say a non-Christian cannot do Christian theology or that a Christian cannot argue something about Muslim theology, for example. (3) So, far from the previous point becoming sectarian or fideist, by delineating a productive account of convictions,

faithful to the communities that hold them (CV, 17), McClendon sees his project as creating the possibility for authentic dialogue, justification, and transformation of problematic convictions. In short, McClendon, along with his atheist co-author James M. Smith, were attempting to peacefully navigate the contemporary milieu of religious pluralism without slipping into a violent imperialism or a despair of relativism (CV, 8).

In understanding that character and convictions are inherently theological as they are ethical, McClendon concludes, “There can be no *a priori* segregation of ethics from theology proper” (BT, 36). This realization leads McClendon to see the irreplaceable value of biography. If theology *is not* lived, it is, on principle, incomplete and unproductive for the church, and vice versa: if theology *is* lived and lived out well, this forms legitimate data for the theological work of expanding a community’s convictions (BT, 37). “Theology at the least must be biography...biography at its best will be theology” (BT, 37–38). Theology as an academic study can be profitable, but if it does not result in teaching for the church, it is in some manner unsuccessful.

2.3 Criteria for Biographical Theology

McClendon offers his specific criteria for the biographical method as a type of narrative theology, which we will now discuss. On the surface, the notion of biographical theology sounds highly anthropological, setting up criteria for theology apart from Scripture, but as we will see this is not quite the case.

1. *Theology may be best expressed through narrative.* McClendon resists propositionalizing doctrine. This does not mean that theology does not form propositions that refer to reality, but rather, that these statements cannot be divorced from their contexts in reality. McClendon developed a full-scale account of this in the book *Convictions*, in which he applies

speech-act theory to understanding religious utterances. To summarize, taking account of the entire speech-act means taking into account the contextual preconditions of meaning and the affective or psychological conditions that allow propositional utterances to be meaningful. This requires greater attention to how beliefs are presented in a convictional community.

For Christians, this means being attentive to how Scripture is presented and applied. Scripture, in all its diverse accounts, is assembled into a grand narrative or “Great Story.” The Bible uses origin story, historical account, legal precept, proverb, psalm, sermon, parable, etc., in order to communicate its truth. Doctrine cannot seek to dispense with these forms to get to propositional content. A survey of Christian history exposes the reality of the importance of biography: the Apostles had their lives recorded in the Book of Acts to edify the Church, the early church was inspired by the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Augustine innovated the first autobiography for theological purposes in his *Confessions*, and so on. Christians consistently employ biographies for the purposes of their convictional communities. McClendon affirms, “Biography is of course one form of story—a form distinguished by being always a human story, and always (in intention) a true story. Perhaps these two marks of biography make it the form of story most nearly suited to Christian faith” (BT, 189). The study of biography for theology is for McClendon an attempt to think through the natural forms with which convictions get communicated.

2. *Biographies ought to be written for Christians who are deserving of “honor and emulation”* (BT, 190). This means two things. One is that their lives were exemplary, such that they would have an inspiring, compelling nature to them. McClendon gives an important warning that this criterion does not mean what they were useful *for*. In other words, influence *per se* is not a criterion. If it was, it could create an aim of the Christian life logically prior to the

Christian life (BT, 191). A successful Christian life is not fame but faithfulness. The other meaning this has is that their example, by the embodiment of certain convictions, is in fact an example that can be followed and re-embodied (BT, 192). Christian biographies are told in discipleship to compel similar action.

3. *Biography employs images, emphasizing that images communicate intelligibly what orders a person's life.* Fundamental to his analysis is the work on images developed by Austin Farrer,²⁰ who argued that revelation in the Gospels was communicated through a set of dominant images (Son of Man, Kingdom of God, Israel, sacrifice, etc.) fused with the historical events of Christ's life. Just as Christ's actions found intelligible interpretation through these images, so a believer's life might be able to intelligibly imitate these narrated images. From Scripture come the narrated images that create patterns for Christian living, passed along in the traditions of the community, often being creatively employed and renovated in this process (BT, 193).

In *Biography as Theology*, McClendon explored the governing images in such lives as Martin Luther King, Jr., who lived the images of the selflessness of the cross for the Exodus-style liberation of black Americans; Dag Hammarskjöld, whose understanding of the cross and the trinity formed a selfless mysticism in his gentle work for peace and reconciliation; Clarence Jordan, whose notion of the incarnational community led him to found Koinonia farm, working to alleviate poverty and living in racial equality; and Charles Edward Ives, who in music longed for authentic religion, his "Beulah Land."

4. *Images form the content of character.* Images can be visual-pictures, word-pictures, or even musical-pictures (as in the case of Ives' "Beulah Land"). "Images are clues to character, just as metaphors are the illuminations of speech" (BT, 193). In other words, images are the raw

²⁰ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948). For a good presentation of his thought see Robert Boak Slocum, *Light in a Burning-Glass: A Systematic Presentation of Austin Farrer's Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

data of thought and action. While we are often not cognizant of many of our basic convictions, convictions can, if we are aware of them, be verbalized in a propositional statement. Images are more elusive to propositional expression.²¹

McClendon's biography on Sarah and Jonathan Edwards is a good example of this (I, chap. 4). While many pre-modern and modern theologies (pagan and Christian alike) demeaned the goodness of the body, sexuality, and of love itself, McClendon insisted Hebraic faith made no such devaluation (I, 153). McClendon saw that Edwards' marriage exemplified this. McClendon shows an interesting correlation between Edwards' married life—which he understands as highly “spiritual”—and his understanding of religious “affection.” Edwards' convictions showed that his love for his wife, in all the messiness of life, was similar to how he understood the love of God (I, 138). Love is holistic and wholesome for the Christian, not dualistic and tragic. Thus, for the Edwards the love images of their marriage drew Jonathan deeper into the love of God. His heart affirmed something theologically brilliant before his mind could theorize it.

Images form convictions that are embodied and enacted, and the successful living out of these images demonstrates their validity (this calls us back to McClendon's fundamental insight concerning the integration of Scripture and life):

to speak truly and faithfully of God is indeed to speak in models, images, analogies—we have no other way. Yet images can speak not only falsehood but also truth. Some set of images, some vision of reality, is better than all the rest because truer, more faithful, more open to hard fact and to beauty and to wonder—more open to the realms of science, of art, and of faith. To note that science depends upon models, art upon abstract forms, and religion upon images, is not to reject these realms, but to open the way to full discovery of the vision they evoke, the truth they can tell. The vindication of vision depends in part upon the quality of life that that vision evokes. (BT, 110)

²¹ A study that corroborates and supplements these findings would be George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980). This study looks at how metaphorical images are fundamental to structuring thought.

Success, in the Christian employment of images, of course, does not refer to worldly success of material prosperity, but to faithful witness to Christ and his work of reconciliation. Validity is synonymous with virtue. Glen Stassen, a colleague and friend of McClendon, recognized that McClendon attempted an “incarnational criterion” for theological validity. Theology that is true is demonstrated as such in the drama of history.²²

This will be taken up in chapter to come, which in turn will fill out this account. Closely tied to catachresis and picture-thinking (in Chapter Seven), images and events in the narrative form and evoke Christ-like living in the present believer. Similarly, in Chapter Eight, we will find that these images are evoked into the lives of Scripture’s readers by the identity creating power of speech-acts, particularly in the Gospels.

Illustrative of the power of images is the life of Hans Hut (II, 94). Hut’s life was strongly marked by his apocalyptic convictions. His intensely chiliastic preaching applied Scripture to his time and to his life. For him the imminent kingdom of God fueled authentic biblical living, in particular, a passion for social justice and equality. A part of this meant separation from the current power structures of his day, which got him labeled a revolutionary. For this, Hut was tried and executed. Successfully living out his convictions meant a life on the run, voluntary poverty, and eventually, death. “Hut remains a martyr for those who recognize not only in his evangelistic passion but also in his eschatological devotion to social justice a kindred spirit” (II, 96).

It should also be noted that the biographical study of Christian lives offers examples of the failure of these images and the conditions under which they happened. McClendon’s biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a good illustration of this (I, chap. 7). Committed to

²² Glen Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 10, 14–15.

pacifism in his early years as a brilliant theologian and pastor, Bonhoeffer was caught aiding a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was tried, imprisoned, and hanged. This has led to a plethora of interpretations of Bonhoeffer's actions: some valorizing his attempt to overthrow Hitler as a turn away from cowardly pacifism into courageous political realism; others seeing this move as complete moral backslide. As with all his biographies, McClendon offers much clearer insight into Bonhoeffer's actions. Bonhoeffer resorted to aiding the assassination out of several pressures: the plot was organized by his own family members; the prospect of the forced draft would mean being forced to bear arms (so better against a tyrant than the Allied forces); Germany, despite its Christian history, did not offer the option of conscientious objector; and the Confessing Church was just as military-oriented as the state church. It seems that Bonhoeffer, a communal thinker through and through, felt compelled to support the convictions of the only community he had. While he was in prison, he lamented the lack of support for his views. Bonhoeffer in prison was still a pacifist, but a Christian pacifist without a pacifist community. Thus, Bonhoeffer did backslide, yes, but it should be noted it was because of a much deeper failure of the entire Christian community to stand with him as a pacifist (I, 211). Bonhoeffer's life reminds us of the limits of even the best individuals. Character requires community.²³

With regards to this criterion, Goldberg wonders how McClendon employs images. He feels that they are static. Goldberg explains,

But McClendon's account, with its talk of a "convergence of images" combining to give a life its "characteristic vision or outlook," leads one to think of human life in rather static terms, as though the image, the vision, and the self come to rest at some fixed point of equilibrium.... It is this dynamic, reciprocal, and evolving process to which *Biography as Theology* ought to perhaps to attend more closely.²⁴

²³ McClendon was working with the material available in his day. For another interpretation of Bonhoeffer's involvement, see Mark Thiessen Nation, Anthony G. Siegrist, Daniel P. Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

²⁴ Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 93–94.

While on the surface it seems very easy to reduce a life story to a set of theological images, this criticism is not apparent in McClendon's biographical work. McClendon investigates people's lives precisely because of the inherent dynamism they have with an image or set of images in which they lived out their convictions in a unique and powerful way.

For example, Dag Hammarskjöld, as McClendon attentively shows, lived out a number of images. Against critics that saw his mystical side as a "messiah" delusion, McClendon shows that while he lived his life in profound loneliness, his convictions propelled him to be a servant. This loneliness was communicated with mystical metaphors of night and darkness, while his selfless servant's heart was communicated using gospel images like the cross and sacrifice (BT, 52–53). In addition to this, his life exhibited a "relational mysticism" with uniquely Trinitarian terms (BT, 58). Thus, Hammarskjöld's biography shows a complex of these images, and McClendon is attentive to this.

The Charles Ives biography provides another interesting example of McClendon's attentiveness. This biography closely follows his musical career where Ives expresses his deepest convictions, convictions that could not be realized in his life. This was, primarily, his longing for an eschatological "Beulah Land" that he hoped would be realized in American religion. However, as McClendon shows, this conviction did find expression in music—because Ives was convinced that music was the only appropriate medium for his religious longing (BT, 159)—and in especially rich forms as he composed his symphonies. These symphonies were diverse and complex. They incorporated philosophical insights from the Transcendentalists, criticisms of fundamentalism, but also subtle allusions to old-fashioned hymns. McClendon concludes,

The religion Ives responds to, born in the meeting houses and camp meetings of New England...sublimated in the passionate transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, lived out in the painful but triumphant experience of Charles Ives's own defeats and

discouragements, is a religion which goes to church without being churchy, which worships Christ without being Christomonistic. It is a religion which Ives took into his own deepest reflections, and expressed musically in ways that both criticize that religion, refine it, and perpetuate it. (BT, 169)

McClendon's biography of Dorothy Day (in I, chap. 10) perhaps best shows this convictional dynamism. The biography tells Day's story towards conversion and pacifist vocation: from her California days where she had a profound fear of "nothingness," to her days in Chicago longing for a day where "a new earth wherein justice dwelleth," and from her more Marxist days (that had an oddly millenarian dimension) to her sense of "natural unhappiness," and finally to taking up a Christian vocation that affirmed the Sermon on the Mount's call to holiness (social as well as personal). This entailed a pacifism that affirmed that "heaven can begin here." The Dorothy Day biography shows McClendon offering close readings of how Day expressed the complex movement of her longings and convictions toward Christianity and specifically Christian pacifism.

Thus we can say that McClendon offers a close reading of people's lives, attempting to follow the progression and complexity that is inherent to each subject's life. While some examples focus on specific instances and events of a person's life, McClendon has a very organic or non-static approach.

5. *McClendon, preferring biography, is ambivalent, if not wary of, autobiography.* While there are without doubt excellent Christian autobiographies such as Augustine's *Confessions*, there is a perennial tendency for us to tell our own stories in ways that prioritize ourselves. In other words, we, as autobiographers, are prone to self-deception. Since we are never able to see ourselves from the outside in, McClendon emphasizes the need for the communal deliberation on a person's story. Full disclosure only occurs in the vulnerability of community, and the full weight of a person's life is only seen in the impact they have on others. David Duke emphasizes

this point: “Perhaps what good biography provides, which most autobiographies cannot provide, is critical distance or a vision of the impact of that life story on other life and community stories—in a word, mission.”²⁵

McClendon’s work assumes the insights Stanley Hauerwas offered on the subject.²⁶ Hauerwas analyzed the autobiography of Albert Speer, one of the architects of the Third Reich. Hauerwas showed that Speer was prone to terrible self-deception because of the master image he used to give his life coherence. In doing so, Speer’s self-awareness was primed to be less than truthful. Speer’s moral failure was the failure of the narratives and master image he built his convictions on.

Even if the autobiographer is not so self-deceived, an emphasis on the biographical end of personal narratives highlights the fact that the self is not an autonomous self or a self-enclosed self. Qi Wang concludes this: “The construction of the autobiographical self is not an individual act.”²⁷ The self is highly communal and cultural. In other words, there is something always external to the self—be it culture, community, or grace—that lends structure to the self. If an autobiography written by a Christian person is to be an intentionally more honest narrative of the self, it must be one that recognizes and welcomes the accountability of others to weigh the truth of that life.

6. *McClendon employs biography to recall theology to its source.* As said previously, McClendon has a high view of experience for theology, but this is not one that creates an alternate foundation apart for Scripture. Rather, the biographies McClendon investigates shows the conscientious journey to reform convictions back to the gospel pattern. “Theology is truly

²⁵ David Duke, “Theology and Biography: Simple Suggestions for a Promising Field.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 13 no. 2 (Summer 1986): 141.

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, “Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer’s *Inside the Third Reich* (1974),” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001): 200–20.

²⁷ Qi Wang, *The Autobiographical Self in Time and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 150.

Christian only as it bases itself on its origin” (BT, 197–98). That origin is the life of Christ and the success of a theological biography is tested against the Christological pattern. As criterion 4 stated above, character is formed through root images or metaphors, but all images (verbal or pictorial, and to a lesser extent, musical)²⁸ must fit into a Christological pattern in the Gospel story (II, 33, 227).

7. *The preceding criterion leads us into the final one: the emphasis of community.* We have already spoken of the need for remembering a person and their convictions through the convictions of a certain community. This ongoing process attempts to surmount the possible vanities of autobiography, and, if the person is faithful at imitating the historical Christ, presented in his “biographies,”²⁹ the Gospels, then this individual offers an inspiring example for others to follow.

This all means that the writing of theological biography is anything but objective. To investigate Christian lives as a Christian is to stay particularly attentive to how their convictions formed their actions. To reflect on their lives is to do so in the interest of truth, but more than that, it is also done to pass on to the rest of the community—not just for history buffs to appreciate but for disciples to follow. This presupposes deeper convictions: that Christ’s example is capable of inspiring new transformative ways of life, but also that these lives are an extension of Christ himself. For the Christian this means that “they are in Christ; Christ is in them...telling

²⁸ Musical, at face value, does not seem to fit into this scheme well, but McClendon demonstrates the ability of music to witness to Christ in *Witness*, where he gives his analysis of jazz music (perhaps he had a change of taste through his life). In his analysis of jazz music, particularly classic jazz, he points out that: the material features of jazz correspond to the religious culture of black free-church communities that produced it; its content often creates references both heavenly and earthly; and its content is often set within themes that fit into a “this is that” gospel typology where the music anticipates and longs for the new creation (III, 165–79).

²⁹ McClendon in his early work on biographies likens the four Gospels to the work of biographies, in his later *Systematic Theology*, he sees the gospels as identity-creating, narrative speech-acts for both Christ and his disciples (I, 335). This description is a bit more complex than mere biography.

their stories is a part of telling *that* story” (BT, 201, italics his). Here we see that McClendon is on the cusp of his “this is that” dynamic.

Concerns: This way of writing biographies that McClendon (in 1975) was developing is a promising and neglected discipline of theology, particularly for baptists. McClendon has helpfully delineated its purpose and scope. However, there are further questions that might be asked in regards to the application of this approach.

1. *If the truth of doctrine resides in its lived examples, what criteria govern convictional failure in a person’s biography?* McClendon’s early work has left much unsaid about the many other employments of this method. Only later does he allude to this in *Witness*:

I have argued that at least for Christian theology the interlocking of life and thought, of mind and deed, is not merely illustrative or decorative—such integration is at the very heart of the theological task...enfleshed Christians’ words are connected with deeds, only as what they think is related to what they are.... Conceded, the method may not work in every case. There are many philosophers, and theologians as well, whose thought is so detached from (or at such variance with!) their lives that the method of biography as theology affords only negative help. (III, 229)

Very few of his biographies offer reflections on the failure of convictions. McClendon concentrates on exemplary Christians, but can the biographical method offer compelling analyses and criticism of failed expressions of Christian life? His biography on Bonhoeffer’s failure to live out his pacifism is noteworthy, as McClendon concludes it was the failure of the community just as much as the individual. In this case the convictions of pacifism and community reveal a competition, or instability, of convictions in Bonhoeffer’s life. This question merely hints at other avenues biographical theology can explore in seeking to understand how people can be inauthentic to their convictions, fail to achieve them, fail to reform them, and/or fail to live them out in community.

2. *Similarly, what is the place and governing criteria for the biographies of non-Christians or un-committed Christians?* McClendon's study of Wittgenstein is a profitable biography, but Wittgenstein falls outside the criteria of being a practicing member of Christian community. The purpose of his biography, nevertheless, was to demythologize the "atheist" and "fideist" readings of Wittgenstein's life and argue that he did have Christian convictions, albeit private and abnormal ones. Wittgenstein stands just outside of the Christian community, but his life and thought offer profound resources to re-center theology on Christ (and not on philosophy). Thus, this biography has quite a different purpose than McClendon's other biographies, but is nonetheless profitable. To draw a comparable example from outside of McClendon's work: considering the vast influence of Gandhi on Christians from Bonhoeffer to King, the biography of non-Christians can offer helpful material to aid in the living out of biblical types and images, in the *embodiment* of such images.

3. *Finally, can McClendon's understanding of the pre-propositional content of ethics be further expanded or clarified to make more sense of the biblical genres that inform ethical action?* In the case of, for instance, Martin Luther King, Jr., we see several over-arching convictions that he lived by—the foremost of which is probably the taking up of one's cross. Analysis that discerns an over-arching set of convictions based on images, metaphors, and narratives is profitable, as McClendon has shown. However, this should not comprehensively describe all actions a person does. How much of Christian ethical character is merely hearing a spoken command or applying a proverb as the Word of God spoken to the person? This action would describe a different form than the image, even though narrative would ultimately steer it. In this regard, McClendon's account could be enriched by someone like Paul Ricoeur, whose discourse theory of revelation accounts for how the various macro-genres of the biblical text

(e.g., narrative, law, proverb, psalm, prophecy, etc.) translate to livable patterns of action in the life of the reader.³⁰ McClendon in his *Systematic Theology* offered insights using these genres, so perhaps, intuitively, he has already addressed this (e.g., his discussion of wisdom in I, 108; or law in I, 186–87). If Christ is the central organizing theme around which all else must fit, this narrative unity of all media merely reiterates criterion 6. Therefore, this is less a criticism than a supplement.

As we survey these basic criteria, some general conclusions about the nature of biographical method can be observed. First, McClendon's approach is highly intuitive, organically reflecting on the lives themselves. While the primary concern of his biographies is the convictions of these individuals, he is careful not to reduce lives to static images or to impose categories on a life. Second, one might worry about what exactly a narrative approach offers to theology, much less a biographical approach. To this concern, McClendon has offered a modest yet profound contribution. Biography as a genre reminds the Christians who reflect on these lives that their communities do in fact have guiding assumptions and purposes that must be recognized. Focusing on the biographical nature of theology recalls Christian communities to a more authentic state: the purpose of the Christian life is found in living out the character of Christ presented in the biographical narratives of the Gospels. Seeking to live the character of Christ is an endeavor done in community, recognizing that our life stories are a shared project. Biography cannot offer new central theological propositions, but it does offer paradigms that can sharpen disciples' attempts to live out Scripture. This will not reveal any new identity of God that was not biblically revealed. However, by encouraging a biographical *discipline*, McClendon argues that doing so can greatly enrich theology's pedagogical purpose.

³⁰ See for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, ed. Mark Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), chaps. 9, 12, 13, and 15.

2.4 Biography and the baptist Vision

While we must await a fuller examination of the baptist vision until the next chapter, we must now ask more pointedly this: how does a biographical approach in narrative theology relate to the baptist vision? How is the baptist employment of biographical theology unique? How does the baptist vision enrich biographical theology, and how does biographical theology enrich baptist theology?

1. *Biography is the precursor to the baptist vision.* As we have already been noting, the fact that a person attempts to embody the images and narratives of Scripture suggests what the baptist vision sees as the “this is that, then is now” dynamic.

In his work on biography, McClendon used Farrer’s image theory but was also slowly recovering typology. The baptist vision is an explicit employment of typology as not simply a way of interpreting Scripture and how Scripture organizes itself, but also how Scripture is lived. The biographical method looks for the dominant images that organize a person’s life. Typology offers a unique set of biblical images in narrative types. Typology—figuration of the past or future and its fulfillment or re-enactment in the present—is the very site of how Scripture was authoritative for present life of the church (II, 40). For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4–6 typologically sees that the rock from which Israel drank “was Christ,” illustrating McClendon’s dictum, “this is that, then is now.” Paul goes on to say that some Israelites did not obey and were struck down. These “examples” (Gk: *typoi*), were, as Paul says, “for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.” Within the Pauline writings, Paul offers Israel, Christ, and himself as “types” or examples to imitate, and he encourages churches and their leaders to be types also.³¹ The biblical narrative was authoritatively employed as it offered a livable, Christocentric pattern, where its types informed and configured the contours of a person’s life—and that of their

³¹ Cf. Rom. 6:17; Ph. 3:17; 1 Th. 1:7; 2 Th. 3:9; 1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7.

community as well. Thus, biography was the gateway for McClendon's developing baptist vision.

2. *The baptist vision offers criteria for biography.* We should note that there have been several notable concerns with the biographical approach as it appeared in the 1970s. The primary critique of McClendon's biographical approach comes from McClendon's own student, Michael Goldberg. Goldberg thinks that biographical theology lacked clear criteria. Goldberg worries,

one of the flaws in McClendon's approach is that there is virtually no methodological structure to it. McClendon is never very explicit or expansive on the question of how "dominant images" come to be recognized and regarded as such by the investigator. Must the image be something explicitly referred to by the subject in his writings or in his public announcements, or is it something which the investigator may validly be able to infer from other sources?³²

While Goldberg recognizes that McClendon refers to a community of interpretation, "he still needs to set forth some more explicit indicators to show how misunderstandings across communal and traditional lines might be avoided."³³

There are two ways to address this criticism. The first is to admit that McClendon was not interested in offering a *precise* methodology. In the end, he admits to subjectivity: "I have chosen these [subjects for biography] because, with all their flaws, I like them very much" (BT, 38). However, subjectivity might simply be the wrapping of a much more thoughtful dimension. This might simply be similar to the "presence of incommunicable experience"³⁴ that Northrop Frye spoke of in regards to why one piece of literature is better than another, yet a critic is often left lacking the words or criteria as to how this may be so. The selection of people McClendon wrote on flowed out of a particular theological taste that he had, which was primed by his own convictions. The result is that the biographer just knows the person is significant. To affirm this

³² Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative*, 92.

³³ Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative*, 92.

³⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 27.

is to merely affirm that, similarly, good theology often happens without precisely offered methodologies. Indeed, much of McClendon's theology affirms the sensibility that good theology often occurs without explicit prolegomena.

The second way of addressing this concern is to state more explicitly what primed McClendon's theological taste. While it is clear that McClendon sees biographical theology as more of an art than a science, to say that McClendon has not offered any criteria is inaccurate, as the list of criteria just discussed will attest.³⁵ We must also again mention the particularity of a biographer's convictions and his or her context within a particular convictional community. McClendon's approach only became more nuanced as he developed a more thorough account of what it means to be a baptist. The baptist vision supplies the implicit criteria that intuitively guide biographical theology. With McClendon's stated biographical criteria, the elements of the baptist vision, and, most importantly, the imagery of Scripture, McClendon has offered sufficient norms for theology that is both biographical and theological.

3. *McClendon's use of biography integrates Scripture and experience.* The fundamental insight that McClendon articulated is the integration of Scripture and life, which he acquired from his baptist sensibilities.

McClendon saw himself as offering a *via media* between conservatism and liberalism, using biography. Conservatism is much too allergic to all categories of religious experience, even the appropriate ones. Barth is the example par excellence, as McClendon argued in *Biography as Theology* that Barth's understanding of the Word of God and his later more positive employments of biography and autobiography were in contradiction (BT, 130).³⁶

³⁵ David Duke, appreciative of McClendon's method, offers an alternative set of criteria in "Biography and Theology: Simple Suggestions for a Promising Field."

³⁶ In this regard, McClendon's understanding, classic of many wary of uncritical conservatism, is a knee-jerk reaction to Barth's rhetoric, seeing it as self-contradictory. Barth does have a productive place for experience, but it

Also, far from seeing this as an experiential criterion of classical liberal theology, McClendon saw Christian biography as actually offering an essential criticism of a classically liberal approach. If biography is irreducibly particular, then a biography of a person's experiences of the God of Scripture cannot (or should not) be generalized, abstracted, or psychologized beyond that particularity. McClendon writes,

What seems most interesting to me is that if biographies be taken as the smallest discrete units in which experience can be reported, we are confirmed in the assumption that (contra Schleiermacher) "experience" is to be understood, not in the abstract or compressed form which the rejection of story would require, but only and exactly in the durational form of narrative. In this sense, when philosophers have asked whether we can have experience *of* God, they have perhaps misleadingly assigned a cognitive priority to the compressed, the non-durational, the abstracted products of actual or durational experience. (BT, 190)

Now it is noteworthy to point out that McClendon softened his interpretation of Schleiermacher later on (and of Barth, too), pointing out that even Schleiermacher had a place for religious experience qualified through languages of one's tradition (II, 462). Nevertheless, human experience has an intrinsically story-formed shape to it, but for McClendon, the more important questions are, *who* is being experienced, *what* is the particular content of that storied experience, and *how* is that lived out, fitting into the biblical story? Thus, experience, properly understood, is not at odds with Scripture, properly understood. In fact, they mutually enhance each other in the baptist vision. Experience is not a structure of experience but an experience of life with God, life lived with God in his community, life lived listening to and living out God's Word in the world.

is highly nuanced and overshadowed by his polemics. In the end, Barth and McClendon probably are not in objection to each other, so much as emphasizing different aspects of the same notion but in very different contexts. Thus, McClendon apparently softened his criticisms of Barth as time went on (see II, 461), although he preferred P. T. Forsyth's understanding of experience in theology. Conservative theology is quite reliant on religious experience, more than what it is methodologically willing to admit. However, with Forsyth, it is experience that points "away from itself" (II, 461).

As early as 1974, McClendon (pre-“baptist” second conversion) wanted to affirm a form of “ecstatic Protestantism”:

“Protestant” honors the iconoclastic tradition of Christianity that resisted the status quo and pat answers. “Ecstatic” refers to the diverse depth of Christian experience of God that allowed for different expressions—Pentecostals, revivalists, puritans, pietists—to move in new directions. (BT, 90)

Baptists, like McClendon, often feel called to innovate their current convictions, particularly those around the practical living out of biblically based doctrines. How is this done without silencing the biblical text with experience? For McClendon, to hold to Scripture’s understanding of authority, or at least one strand of it, is to uphold a tradition that is highly dynamic, innovating itself through a pneumatic leading. To apply these insights to biographical theology is to be particularly attentive to how the Spirit, speaking with Scripture, allows one to hold theological convictions fallibly and critically against what Scripture shows. Also, it illustrates how some have been moved to explore new and prophetic forms of Christianity, challenging the ethical status quo. Thus, experience (or a type of experience) does play an essential role in offering important contributing data for advancing doctrine’s application in life. Convictions, even supposedly biblical ones, can become problematic, even oppressive, upholding rather than challenging the status quo. Thus, reapplying Scripture in new ways is apart of the work of being faithful to it.

Biographical theology records and deliberates on contemporary forms of these convictional challenges and innovations. McClendon looks to individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Clarence Jordan as examples of Baptists who immersed themselves in Scripture, reflecting on it from the lens of their own context and experiences, and enacting a revolutionary form of Christian teaching, at odds with what they saw expressed around them, challenging racism (for which fundamentalism at the time argued with a biblical backing). Scripture did not

explicitly tell King to start a bus campaign in Montgomery or to march on Washington, but there is something about the scriptural image of the exodus that compelled him to do so in the hope of liberating blacks (and by extension, whites too) from a spiritual Egypt. Similarly, good solid exegesis convicted Clarence Jordan that the gospel implies racial equality, but we might wonder why his Southern Baptist brethren did not see this. Looking to the image of an incarnational community, he was compelled to use his farming background to form Koinonia farm, a community that took in abused black people and got them back on their feet. These same convictions caused Jordan to stick with this vision despite alienation from the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as threats, a boycott, and even acts of terrorism. Because of his commitment to equality and nonviolence, there are few today that would see his opponents' interpretation of the Bible as the correct one.

Thus, biographical theology cannot offer a new account of God. However, it can show how certain ways of living out convictions about God can be problematic. It does not offer new theological content per se, only ethical recommendation. What it does offer is testimony of attempts to live the Christian vocation successfully. What it does potentially contribute are successful demonstrations of doctrinal truth in the life of a Christian, especially, as McClendon employed them early on, attempts that are both biblically rooted and attempt to push a convictional community further in its moral life.

4. *Biography is connected to the baptist convictions of discipleship.* A biographical narrative theology is employed in baptist theology because of its integration of theology and life as well as its pedagogical value.

The emphasis on the integration of Scripture and life as well as ethics and theology are, of course, central for McClendon's project precisely because they form (or agree with) a baptist

distinctive. As McClendon reports, the radical reformation keyword was not merely “faith” (as with the Reformers) but “following” (I, 29). Concerning biography, he wrote,

Christian ethics grasps the live flesh of Christian experience; Christian doctrine traces its living skeleton, the bones within the flesh that give stability and coherence to its life. Without Christian life, the doctrine is dead; without Christian doctrine, the life is formless. (I, 7)

Biographical theology supports the contextual nature of theology where true convictions are lived out. But it is much more than that, as many Christian bodies hold to this integration. For baptists, who are neither Protestant nor Catholic in McClendon’s estimate (a claim we will assess later), commitment to this integration comes at the potential price of being at odds with the norms of the dominant ecclesial bodies.

Because of this integration, biographical narratives offer a medium for pedagogy in discipleship that baptists gravitate towards. The offering of testimonies for the purpose of encouragement has been a traditional practice in baptist life. In particular, narrative masterpieces such as *The Martyr’s Mirror*³⁷ and the *GeschichtsBuch* (sometimes called the *Klein-Geschichtsbuch*), both chronicles of different groups of martyrs from the 16th and 17th centuries, have been widely read in baptist communities (I, 37). Baptist preaching has readily employed the biographical genre in its pursuit of discipleship.

This pattern he expands in *Doctrine* with his introduction to the baptist “guideposts” for the faith journey (II, 135), which he lists as preparation (preferring catechesis over infant baptism), conversion (marked by baptism), following (marked by ongoing taking of communion), and finally, “soaring.” Soaring is the stage of faith where, by communal discerning, gifts and new vocation is identified. McClendon argues that the Anabaptist recovered

³⁷ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Martyr’s Mirror*, trans. Joseph Sohm (Kitchener: Herald, 1938).

this practice (II, 143), and as we will see, it is vital to the baptist vision. Biography is discipleship and these stages of discipleship structure and interpret one's biography.

5. *Biography is used in McClendon's work as if to propose a unified baptist tradition.*

This telling of biographies (and autobiographies) for discipleship purposes is a neglected element of baptist tradition. Baptists are often deemed "anti-traditional" or even, more ironically, "traditionally anti-traditional,"³⁸ and there is some truth to that: baptists insist on a kind of critical priority of Scripture over tradition, which can lead to a general neglect of tradition. However, as McClendon rebukes, baptists often go too far, to the point of denigrating the biblical need for the faithful "handing on" (1 Cor. 15:3) of faith. "Such tradition does not rival the Bible" (II, 469). But, McClendon insists, tradition, while it is a "hermeneutical aid" (II, 471) cannot have a "monopoly on the biblical voice" (II, 468). The subject of tradition will have its own chapter later.

McClendon was not simply a baptist doing theology, but a baptist offering a baptist way of doing theology.³⁹ A part of this was to see the history of baptist people as a legitimate resource for enriching theology. In this sense, it can be said that McClendon was attempting a *ressourcement* of baptist tradition, even a self-conscious attempt to propose a unified notion of tradition, in a situation where baptist theology has grown stagnant. Part of this kind of tradition—a set of practices that enhance Scripture's application for a community—has usually been orienting believers toward a selection of outstanding believers as examples.

Thus, throughout his work, McClendon was retelling stories of forgotten baptist minds whether Hans Hut or Balthasar Hubmaier. His co-edited work, *Baptist Roots*, while not a set of

³⁸ For an examples of this criticism see Richard Lints, *Fabric of Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999). On the notion of tradition in baptist theology, see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), and Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

³⁹ Curtis W. Freeman, "Introduction: A Theology for Radicals and Other Baptists," in I, xxxvii.

biographies per se, quite deliberately offers an expansive account of baptist voices, including the Anabaptists, women leaders, modern liberal Baptists, Black Baptists, and non-Westerners. McClendon's work in biography is the work of reinvigorating baptist tradition.

Concerns: There is only one nagging question that must be brought up before we continue into the next chapters. Does baptist theology have a strong enough notion of tradition—or set of resources recognized within the tradition—to provide criteria for discerning a biography that is both (1) separate from other Christian groups and (2) unifying to all baptists? Baptists are by origin polymorphic, inherently diverse, and (some might argue), as history has shown, inherently divisive. Martin Luther King, Jr., is, sadly, not recognized as a Christ-like hero by many baptists; neither is Clarence Jordan; neither is James William McClendon. What equivalent to the Catholic canons of doctors and saints is there for baptists, to recommend these exemplary individuals as authentic revolutionaries of the tradition?

McClendon's ressourcement through biography is obviously selective and obviously constructive. He de-prioritizes conservatives, particularly those of more fundamentalist leanings. Yet, he seeks a notion of the "baptist peoples that is inclusive of all its voices as much as possible" (BR, 9). His preference goes to the neglected progressive voices. McClendon sees himself as standing with the unheard prophets. While this might merely reveal McClendon's longstanding heart for the underdog, perhaps there is a grander intention here. Perhaps by the very fact that McClendon is calling attention to a stream of thought with such rich, unheard voices—that baptist thought *does* work in a tradition—he is attempting to set up the process and mechanics necessary to advance baptists past their more regressive forms.

While we will explore notions of catholicity in another chapter, one must confess that to be a baptist is to be aware of the fragmentation of Christianity, a fragmentation that is not merely

seen by looking out the window at the churches around the corner but is grasped from the diversity of expressions of belief represented within the pews of one's own church. This fragmentation, at worst, condemns the tradition to inherent absurdity, or as McClendon argues more optimistically, this offers more self-consciously the opportunity to practice a unity in diversity through humble love (II, 44). As any rate, it begs the question, "How will baptists continue to tell their story?"

The biographical approach that McClendon pioneers is intertwined with his baptist identity. We have explored this connection with regards to the criteria the baptist vision offers, the integration of Scripture and experience in both the reading of Scripture faithfully and living of Scripture creatively, the emphasis of discipleship (an ardent baptist distinctive), and how biographical practices (whether the passing along of testimony or McClendon's deliberate ressourcement of baptist voices) constitute an essential yet often overlooked element of baptist tradition.

2.5 Conclusion

John Keats once wrote, "Above all, they are very shallow people who take everything literal. A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life...a life like the Scriptures, figurative."⁴⁰ This chapter has investigated the nature and criteria for McClendon's biographical approach as a way in which believers have lived the Scriptures. The biographical approach displays the characteristic integration of narrative and life: "this is that." While McClendon's biographies are diverse and cannot be pigeonholed like other more rigid methodologies, biography seems to be clearly employed as a means of conviction analysis, offering a baptist ressourcement for others to emulate. The emphasis on biography as a

⁴⁰ Quoted in Gittings, *Nature of Biography*, 13.

genre as well as a procedure calls attention to the nature of experience, action, and the role of convictions of a faith community that tells and retells life stories. Ultimately for the Christian, this recalls the prime biography as the central measure of all the images Christian lives display: the life of Christ. However, this raises certain questions about the nature of the baptist identity, which we will continue to investigate.

Chapter 3: The baptist Vision as Typological Practice

“A correct formulation of the Scripture Principle is not the crucial thing but a determination to know and love and serve God under the authority of his Word.”

- Clark Pinnock¹

As we saw from McClendon’s work in biography and theology, McClendon had a burden to integrate doctrine and action using literary resources. As we saw in his biographies on important but often forgotten radicals, he also had a heart for the baptist tradition. His study on biography drew his theological reflection to the contemporary embodiment of scriptural themes, and thus was very much the precursor to his baptist vision (BT, 98). McClendon’s baptist vision is his mature attempt to bridge the gap between exegesis and theology as well as between doctrine and action. In this chapter we will explore the nature of this vision. In doing so, we will see that McClendon is correctly describing the central organizing literary structure of meaning for the Bible, one with vast interpretive importance and potential, which he claims as the heart for baptist identity, creating a successful (although not perfect) hermeneutical circle between the baptist church and the biblical narrative.

This chapter will examine the exact nature of the baptist vision as a way of understanding the interconnected meaning of Scripture. The vision asserts that Scripture in numerous ways is interconnected in a “this is that, then is now” kind of inter-textual fashion, allowing for typological reading. Next, we will see how this structure can be a prescriptive, organizing principle for baptist identity. It seems obvious that, historically, baptists have used, intuitively and instinctively, a “this is that” way of reading and living out the biblical text, but still we must ask in what way this is particularly “baptist” and how this will offer an organizing principle for baptist theology. In turn, we will see that the practices of the baptist community situate figural

¹ Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 65.

reading. As we will see, this chapter will introduce key topics and issues that will be developed more fully in other chapters.

3.1 “This is That, Then is Now” as Typology

McClendon sees the baptist vision (which we will sometimes simply call “the vision”) as the fundamental way the Bible’s meaning connects together and therefore central (prescriptively central, if not always descriptively so) for how the biblical narrative is lived. Because Scripture is organized typologically, it is able to be read Christocentrically, and because it is read Christocentrically, it is thus able to be lived out in the church today. To explain this, we will first look at how the vision structures Scripture within itself and within the church, then we will look at some virtuous practices of figural reading that McClendon outlines.

Thus, the first aspect McClendon wants to stress is that typology is how Scripture employs Scripture. Some have noted the explicit references to “types,” “figures,” and “prefigures” in Scripture,² but McClendon sees typology as a far more comprehensive category. It is a comprehensive observation about Scripture’s textual intention. It is how Scripture fits together in itself and to the present church: inter-textually from one text to another, canonically with the Old Testament in Christ, and prophetically as Christ addresses the church, whether the early church or now and the future. McClendon considers the baptist vision to be synonymous with the “prophetic vision” (I, 31–32), citing B. Davie Napier:

we have in the Old Testament no past which has not already been appropriated in the present, and so appropriated as to *be* in the present, to *live* in the present. [For the prophets,

² The overt examples are Romans 5:14 (that Adam is a “type” of Christ), Hebrews 9:24 (the sanctuary as a “prefigure” of Christ), and 1 Peter 3:21 (the flood and ark “prefigure” baptism). Others include the language of how the Law, Sabbath, and sacrifices are but a “shadow” of Christ as in Colossians 2:16–17 and Hebrews 10:1. For a magisterial account of the specific usages of “types” in Scripture, see Richard Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1981); Leonard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

the past] *was* past, but it now *is*. The event lives in faith. It has been culticized.... As such, it is...not so much (if at all) merely memorialized as re-experienced—created and lived again.³

McClendon's favorite example looks to Acts 2:16–17 where Peter cites the Prophet Joel, proclaiming “this is that.” It is McClendon's argument that the way the Bible seeks to be read is as something that speaks to the present. The present reader is invited by the text to read the narrative *as the disciples* in the narrative (I, 336). Another example he gives is the explanation of crossing the Red Sea in 1 Corinthians 10, which Paul interprets as an act of baptism. And this “example” (literally, “type”) of Israel committing idolatry in the wilderness afterwards stands as a warning to what Christians were doing in Corinth, despite the obvious dissimilarity (CW1, 130). In Luke 9, Jesus asked, “Who do the people say that I am?” as well as, “Who do you say that I am?” The answers were telling, illustrative of the “this is that” dynamic. Some, the disciples suggested, said John the Baptist (this was an inaccurate use of “this is that”), others Elijah, which was better (CW1, 132). Peter answered with the “anointed one”; this was the fullest explanation. Yet Jesus answers with his self-equation with the “son of man,” drawing from Ezekiel and Daniel 7. McClendon writes,

Jesus was in the business not of denying but making history, and in order to do that he had to create a new sense of history. The Gospels show us Jesus did this by drawing upon the great formative scriptural images, applying them to himself to divine his role in the unfolding story. He was the Anointed One, the Son of David whose kingdom would have no end.... History that is more than chronology and necrology appears only when it is viewed with the eyes like Jesus' eyes, eyes that can see how this is that, how storied past and prophetic future converge upon this present. No wonder this became the apostolic strategy in reading Scripture. Must it not also have been Jesus' own hermeneutic, passed along to his inner circle...? (CW1, 132)

Thus, simply put, typology is the Bible's way of understanding the Bible.

³ George A. Butterick, et al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 906, quoted in I, 32–33.

It is also by a similar dynamic that the church interprets Scripture (and itself). McClendon writes,

So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical principle: shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community. In a motto, the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is our liberty, our obedience, till time's end. (I, 30)

The church sees itself in the text as if the text were contemporaneous with the church, even calling the church forward. For example, McClendon notes that there is no end to the academic interpretive issues in the Sermon on the Mount. This pithy sermon has spawned volume after volume of commentaries. Yet, a baptist like Clarence Jordan, a person of excellent scholarly acumen, was not so burdened with his academics as to be unable to reach a conclusion that this sermon was speaking to him in his own time (II, 467). A part of this was that Jordan literally thought the text was calling to him to reconcile with his black brothers and sisters, working to serve them and liberate them by living in radical community with them. This dynamic was possible despite the distance of time, because of the ongoing presence of Christ to the church, then, now, and in the future.

Thus, this dynamic of typology—"this is that, then is now, the present church is the primitive church and the church on judgment day"—is, in its specific description, how the Bible constructs its own meaning from text to text, from Christ to church, from past to future.

3.2 Rules for Reading

So, how does this reading work? As a present practice by the church, typological reading often happens naturally as a believer listens to the Spirit speaking in the text and the believer sees himself or herself in the text. However, this practice is not merely done intuitively and unknowingly. It can be done intentionally and virtuously. Thus, McClendon recommends a

grammar for typological reading (which are based on the doctrinal preface to the first and second volumes).

We should note that speaking about these rules of reading in this section and the next (which connects and particularizes them within the baptist identity) is similar to analyzing the “grammar” of doctrine that McClendon utilizes to understand the teachings of different communities. This analogy, comparing doctrine to grammar, is a literary tool that we will discuss in a later chapter. While this is by no means an exhaustive list, some of the rules are as follows:

1. *The baptist vision means believers identify with the story of Scripture as their own story, as they are committed to an ongoing practice of listening to the Spirit speaking through Scripture.* Figuration explains in part how Scripture is heard today as God’s Word.⁴

The Bible sees the events of the past being relived and actualized in the present. McClendon, accordingly, sees the events of the text as occurring in the present:

The baptist vision sees that the narrative the Bible reflects, the story of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church, is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live. Thus that vision functions as a hermeneutic. Construing our experience by way of Scripture, it shows how the two are properly joined. (I, 36)

“This is that” means the statements of Scripture still do relate to today, beyond their historical past.

This is not meant as a denial of the facts of history, nor a rejection of their significance; it is a claim for the historic significance of this present time in the life of the church and therefore by implication of every other present time in its life. So far from rejecting the church’s history as some have charged, this baptist vision claims importance for every chapter of it. (I, 30)

⁴ In another chapter, we will explain how McClendon applies speech-act theory to help understand how the Spirit speaks through the Bible, to us today, as God’s Word.

To reflect on the authority of the Scriptures in the baptist vision is to ask, “What do the Scriptures do?” McClendon answers: the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, identify Jesus to us (I, 334), while identifying us as/with Christ’s disciples. McClendon writes,

whereas the identity of Jesus is at once that of the risen Christ present in the readers’ church *and* the central figure in the gospel, the identity of the “disciples” is by invitation the readers themselves as well as their originals in the story.... We are invited to become disciples, and thus to see ourselves figuring in this narrative. If we do, we will be neither Jesus nor his opponents; our natural identification is with these hapless servants who nevertheless are transformed by the good news. (I, 336)

The Bible is authoritative as the Word of God through the “this is that” dynamic. Through Christ, the Bible is the Word of God written: “it is that text in which One who lays claim to our lives by the act of his life makes that claim afresh in acts of speech; it is for us God speaking; it is the word of God” (II, 464). In Christ, God spoke and God continues to speak now through the biblical text as the church practices ongoing listening and obedience.

2. *Typology mediates between the “plain” sense and the “spiritual” sense.* Here McClendon draws from historic ways⁵ Christians have interpreted the text in the “literal sense,” which he takes to mean that the narrative speaks plainly about real events and real people, rather than speaking in allegorical codes to be mystically deciphered (II, 36).

However, as we will see, “plainness did not imply triviality” (II, 36). As McClendon continues:

Spiritual sense meant not an abandonment or discarding of the plain sense, but its appropriation into the whole story of divine and human relations; it meant the way the

⁵ See Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988). For a specific treatment of the loss of narrative and typological meaning, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Also, for a baptist treatise on the loss of spiritual interpretation, see Curtis Freeman, “The Eclipse of Spiritual Exegesis: Biblical Interpretation from the Reformation to Modernity,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (Summer 1993): 21–28; and cf. Rowan Williams, “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” *Modern Theology* 7 (January 1991): 121–34.

plain words bore upon readers' lives in relation to all that God had done and would do in their regard. (II, 36)

The importance of the literal sense does not enslave believers to a meaning monopolized by historical references (as we will see in a Chapter Nine),⁶ but rather, has within it the intention of a "spiritual sense," sometimes called the "theological sense."

Thus, for example, while McClendon does a comparative analysis of different myths in relation to the Genesis accounts, showing the latter's polemical intent towards pagan myths (II, 152–54), he moves on to cite Augustine as reading "Let there be light" in Gen. 1:3 as a legitimate reference to spiritual realities of the church's present salvation in Christ, the light of the world (cf. Jn. 8:12). Augustine thought this was a part of the literal sense. This suggests that for McClendon, the literal sense is really a *holistic* or *canonical* sense where the entire biblical narrative informs its constituent parts. Thus, the statements in Genesis on light in creation are read through the whole complex of Scripture, and particularly through Christ, to allow for the reading that creation is happening *now*. "This is that," and thus, McClendon in this section on creation offers a unified account of creation that sees creation as simultaneously past gift, ongoing travail, and future promise, linking the past event with the ongoing work of the people of God and the future new heavens and new earth (II, 146–93).

3. *Typology ultimately refers to the identity of Christ as the interpretive key of Scripture.* The Bible is "a book of Jesus Christ, a book that is about him, a book that finds its interpretive key in him, a book that points as a witness to him" (II, 463). Thus, the "this is that" dynamic necessitates that Christ is the interpretive key to the Bible (II, 38) as Christ is the one speaking through it. McClendon also states, "Typology thus stands as the chief trope by which plain sense and final point are linked...it was not merely a way to read Scripture, but was *the way*" (II, 37).

⁶ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2.

McClendon summarizes the rules of Hans Frei,⁷ where (1) the Bible is interpreted *Christologically*. By this he means “Readers of the ‘Bible as literature’ who overlook that world-altering conviction [that the Bible is the book of Jesus] simply fail to read *the Bible*” (CW2, 269). (2) The Bible is to be interpreted as a canonical unity, guided by the first rule. This repudiates any attempt either to create a canon within a canon, apart from Christ, or to segregate other Scriptures off as unwanted or useless: “If Jesus is the Christ, we have a Bible of two Testaments” (CW2, 269). All statements in Scripture pertain to Christ, as Christ to them. Finally, (3) the Bible may be read using other means as long as it does not contradict the first two rules (II, 38). This, for McClendon, refuses any narrow methodological dogmatism from controlling the biblical text, whether from fundamentalism, liberalism, or traditionalism. “The Bible opens a world of freedom” (CW2, 296). McClendon places typology as central, but has no problem gleaning insights from historical-critical or literary approaches. McClendon acknowledges the documentary hypothesis. He employs precise grammatical analysis to understand passages in many cases. He sees a literary approach as perhaps most helpful, one in which the identification of characters, plots and sub-plots, and settings enrich the reading of the text in its reading community, the church (II, 40). A part of a literary approach, he uses catachresis and speech-act theory to analyze the text. However, to reiterate, all such *general* hermeneutics must be guided by *specific* ones. For McClendon this means, first, that the true, narrating voice of Scripture is the Spirit, who speaks through the human authors, and second, that the church’s members are the designated hearers of these texts. To understand this is to understand that:

Explicit or not, Scripture is the tale God tells; it is God speaking; it is the word of God, not in part, not here and there, and not “within” or merely “in,” but “as” Scripture. As theology this may offend some, but I mean it in the first place as literary truth: We can make *full*

⁷ These are stated in Hans Frei, “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?” in *The Bible and Narrative Tradition*, ed. F. McConnell (New York: Oxford, 1986), 68.

sense of the biblical narrative only when we see its implied narrator not as the human author (who, to be sure, is fully involved at his or her own level), but as the very God of whom Scripture speaks. (II, 40–41)

We will get into more detail about what that means practically, but one example illustrates this approach well. McClendon upholds, contra perhaps an unsympathetically historical-critical reading, that the book of Joshua is Christian Scripture. Yet, for McClendon, in order for a Christian to read the Book of Joshua appropriately, with its dark, genocidal passages, it must be read through Christ, with its figures pointing to and fulfilled in Christ. Christ is the “new Joshua,” who conquers by the way of the cross and thus, by refusing to take up war, courageously saves God’s people, bringing them into the true Promised Land (II, 235).⁸ Its language, imagery, and narratives (its literal sense) form a bridge to the present through Christ as its embodiment (the spiritual sense).

4. Following the third rule, *if the church is the listener, typology means that all biblical interpretation must culminate in Christ-like action, such that Christ-like action in community aids in interpretation*. This point circles us back to the original claim that Scripture’s story is our story.

As we will see later, interpretation is not done in a disembodied manner. The narrative does inform practices. The biblical narrative, as we will discuss in another chapter, offers a total

⁸ This typological approach has been employed in contemporary discussions on the war texts of Joshua as they are interpreted in Christian Scripture. See Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), as well as Kenton Sparks, “Gospel as Conquest: Mosaic Typology in Matthew 28:16–20,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68.4 (Oct. 2006): 651–63. He points out that the language of presence (“I will be with you always,” e.g.) in Joshua, before he conquers the land, is typologically used in Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples before they go out into the whole earth. Conquest is fulfilled in nonviolent discipleship as it is displayed typologically.

representation of reality—past, present, future—offering the language to form intelligible action.⁹ McClendon writes in *Ethics*:

My story is inadequate, taken alone, and is hungry for a wider story to complete it.... My story must be linked with the story of a people.... Our story is inadequate as well: The story of each and all is itself hungry for a greater story that overcomes our persistent self-deceit, redeems our common life, and provides a way for us to be a people among all earth's peoplehood, their own stories, their own lives...truth entails character, [and] must find that truth in a community that is of necessity story-shaped, and to show that Christian morality involves us, necessarily involves us, in the story of God. (I, 351)

However, practices also form interpretations. Virtuous practices are intelligible through their narratives, but in turn, narratives are situated by virtuous practices. Interpretation is a question not of simply reading a text, but of how, why, and in what context of action the text is read. A practice can form affective logics, making certain interpretations more plausible than others. The notion that practices function to have this pre-critical and affective influence has been developed by anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who said, “Practice has a logic which is not that of a logician.”¹⁰ Max Weber called these pragmatic preconditions of an interpretation held by a particular group to be their “elective affinity.”¹¹ Pivotal, then, is the interrelation of the social practices of redemption and associated narratives. Both can complement and correct each other.

This is why a reading community like the church is essential to figural interpretation. The community site forms the how and why of the reading of the text. Stanley Fish, commenting on the role of reading communities, says,

Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features...these strategies exist

⁹ Paul Ricoeur offers an account of how literary discourse of all sorts offer the patterns by which our actions re-motivate and re-orient themselves through the new paradigms offered to them. See Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 176.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 86.

¹¹ Gordon Marshall, “Elective Affinity,” *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 1998, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-electiveaffinity.html>. Weber used the term to understand the affinity Protestantism had for capitalism.

prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around...there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only “ways of reading” that are extensions of community practices.¹²

The biblical narrative is a narrative of the actions of redemption by God to the church, where believing individuals gather to recite and reflect on their narratives in order to continuously live them.

McClendon observes this dynamic within the biblical text. The biblical *types* in the Old Testament and in Christ (as well as in the apostles) form patterns for the present to follow as a *mimesis*.¹³ In Romans 6:17, apostolic teaching provides the “example” (Gk.: *tupon*) to follow. In 1 Peter 2:21, Christ is the example to follow because he is the “master copy” (Gk.: *hupogrammos*). Similarly, in Philippians 3:17 Paul’s conduct forms the “pattern” (Gk.: *typos*) for the church to follow. The Thessalonian church “followed” (Gk.: *mimetai*) Paul’s and the Lord’s examples. Finally, in 1 Corinthians 10:1–12, Paul offers the images of rebellion in the wilderness as “patterns” (Gk.: *typoi*) to warn the present against their own temptation to follow the pattern of idols. Thus, this figural structure forms the basis of New Testament ethics for the church then and now.¹⁴

Just as practices are formed by narrative, interpretations of specific passages are viable for the church as they culminate in Christ-like practice (which we saw in treating biography). Christ-like action is an interpretive criterion (II, 473). It is only in practicing Christ that the Scriptures are truly understood, and it is this practice that constitutes a final terminus of interpretation and a criterion for its validity for the church.

¹² Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 14–16.

¹³ While the biblical narrative uses the language of *typos*, Ricoeur offers a contemporary philosophical account of the connection between *mythos* and *mimesis*. *Mythos* (an “emplotment”) in Ricoeur’s thought is fairly analogous to *typos*, which also deals with narrative pattern. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 31–37.

¹⁴ Other passages include 2 Thess. 3:9; 1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7.

Thus, these are some general theological and grammatical rules for figuration. However, we must note that theology is never done *in general* for McClendon (II, 50). All theology is done in a *particular* ecclesial space, so we must move on to consider what these rules look like within the baptist context.

3.3 What Is “baptist” about the baptist Vision?

At this point, we must ask some obvious and nagging questions: How is any of this uniquely “baptist”? Is not typology the common inheritance of all Christian traditions? If so, is the “baptist” vision then a misnomer? What makes McClendon’s approach unique to the baptists? Moreover, how does the vision propose a unifying structure to the baptist identity? To this we must note that McClendon’s proposal is general up front but particularizes itself upon further inquiry. Thus, baptist communities and traditions situate the vision as the vision forms these practices. This offers an ongoing structure to baptist theology, which we will explain from the following observations in McClendon’s writings:

1. *The baptist vision is based on a “mode” historically characteristic of baptist life.*

McClendon’s central insight is the integration of theology and ethics in convictions and practices, characterizing a more practical mode of theology that he observes to be common (although not uniform) in baptist life. While he does develop his own conceptual account of practical doctrine, this practical mode of doctrine is characteristic of a kind of theological pragmatism found in the baptist identity.

Looking at the baptist tradition (or cultural-linguistic system, to use Lindbeck’s characterization), with its particular historical testimony, practices, institutions, etc., we see a distinct “mode” to doctrine. It is not altogether unique, but it is different. McClendon points out that baptist theology is overtly practical in nature. Walter Klaassen observes that this has been a

mark of baptist thinkers through the tradition. He points out that Anabaptists reject all forms of theological scholasticism and idealism that detract from a simple Christocentric reading of the text that results in Christ-like action.¹⁵ The founding Anabaptists reacted against the antinomian elements in Lutheran preaching that downplayed the need for obedience as an integral element of faith itself. They mistrusted scholastic theology, and instead preferred to organize themselves by their practices. This is particularly evident in the early confessions.¹⁶ While this notion of a practical mode (or grammar) will be further explained later, suffice it to say that the baptist mode is characteristically practical in orientation.

2. *The baptist vision offers a unifying motif for baptist identity.* The vision offers a description of the way baptists live the biblical narrative, and from this vision, this situated practice offers a way baptists can further develop their theology, organizing all other baptist traits. Apart of his baptist notion is the assumption that Baptists and Anabaptists (as well as other free church groups)¹⁷ are (or could be) apart of the same identity. This link we will assume for now but will fully take up in Chapter Ten.

Displaying this integration is the vision itself. The vision “is not merely a reading strategy by which the church can *understand* Scripture; it is a way—for us, it is *the* way—of Christian existence itself” (I, 33). It is a part of a holistic attempt to understand belief, practice, and the

¹⁵ Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, 3rd ed. (Kitchener: Pandora, 2001), 40-51. Klaassen gives several examples. Balthasar Hubmaier polemicized arguments for infant baptism that tried to create a set of logic apart from the logic of Scripture, arguing that by the same logic, if children, without profession of faith or voluntary obedience, have the Holy Spirit (thus warranting baptism), “one could see a new Christ out of a pumpkin” (43). Hans Hut preached against Luther for making justification by faith into justification that goes no further than faith (43). Pilgram Marpeck argued against predestinarian readings of divine omnipotence, since Christ is the Word and Will of God that subordinates any doctrine of omnipotence (47). Peter Rideman argued for a notion of preaching where, if the preacher did not live what they preached, the Word of God was only proclaimed in letter, not spirit (50). Menno Simons argued that “words without actions do not edify” (51). Similarly, Hans Denck saw knowing Christ not merely as assenting to doctrines but taking up a *following* of Christ (51).

¹⁶ E.g., *The Eighteen Dissertations* (1524), *Schleitheim Confession* (1527), *Discipline of the Church* (1527), and *Rideman’s Rechenschaft* (1540). See William Lumpkin and Bill Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 2011), 18–42.

¹⁷ See I, 33–34.

way baptists live the biblical text. The vision is a comprehensive account of central orienting practices of a community, in this case those practices that are unique to baptists.¹⁸

Thus, McClendon wants to make clear he is not attempting an abstract theory or set of ideals when he uses the term “vision.” His wording becomes more intuitive at this point: “guiding pattern,” “emerging theme,” “tonal structure” (I, 27). It is something already present, awaiting full recognition and employment.

Once acknowledged for what it is, the vision should serve as the touchstone by which authentic baptist convictions are discovered, described, and transformed, and thus as an organizing principle around which authentic baptist theology can take shape. (I, 27)

Moving on from there, McClendon lists other encompassing themes, which his baptist vision is meant to unify:

¹⁸ Within this footnote is a bibliographical list on major proposals and apologia for Baptist and Anabaptist identity from this century that this researcher has gone through. It is impossible to consider all these proposals within the space of this research project, let alone this chapter. However, as we see, while some see themselves as distinctly Baptist or Anabaptist with no higher denominational identification, others identify themselves more broadly with identities like evangelical, liberal, free church, etc. Some focus their identity into theological categories such as Christology or the Trinity, and others into ecclesial distinctives. Either way, the five-fold criteria of McClendon’s baptist list (Bible, liberty, community, discipleship, and mission) are more than an adequate typology for most of these characterizations. The following major themes of each thinker are shown in bold: Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1944): **Voluntary discipleship, community of equality and love, and nonviolent witness.** William Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport: Praeger, 1994): **The voluntary church.** Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believer’s Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1968): **The believer’s church or free church** entailing **separation of church and state.** Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003): **Trinity, covenant, baptism, communion, witness, liberty, etc.** Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation* (Vancouver: Regent, 1985). Grenz is primarily evangelical and secondarily a Baptist. All theology, for Grenz, is **trinitarian in structure, communal in ethic, eschatological in orientation**, and baptists are known their ecclesial distinctives organized into the acrostic BAPTIST (**Biblical authority, Autonomy of the local church, Priesthood of all believers, Two ordinances, Individual soul liberty, Saved church membership, Two offices, Separation of church and state**). Franklin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Starr King, 1952): **Restoration of the apostolic pattern of church.** E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908); Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1912): **“Soul competency” with other Baptist distinctives.** Walter Rauschenbusch, “Why I Am a Baptist,” in *A Baptist Treasury*, ed. Sydnor L. Stealey (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1958), 163–84: **Experimental religion.** Walter Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smith & Helwys, 1993): **Soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom, and religious/state freedom.** Donovan Smucker, “The Theological Triumph of the Early Anabaptist-Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (January, 1945), 5-26: **Biblicism.** Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005): **Liberty, specifically renouncing “sacred violence.”** John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985): Non-Constantinian ecclesial practices such as pacifism and communal interpretation.

- (1) *Biblicism*, understood not as one or another theory of inspiration or inerrancy, but as humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture for both faith and practice. (Related themes are “restitution” and “restoration.”)
- (2) *Liberty*, understood not as the overthrow of all oppressive authority, but as the church’s God-given freedom to respond to God without the intervention of the state or other powers. (Related themes are intentional community, voluntarism, “soul competency,” separation of church and state.)
- (3) *Discipleship*, understood neither as a vocation for the few nor an esoteric discipline for adepts, but as life transformed into service by the lordship of Jesus Christ. (Signified by believer’s baptism; related themes are “the rule of Christ” and “the rule of Paul.”)
- (4) *Community*, understood not as some group’s privileged access to God or to sacred status, but as sharing together in a storied life of witness to Christ exercised in mutual aid and in service to others. (Signified by the Lord’s table or Eucharist; a related theme is the regenerate or believer’s church.)
- (5) *Mission* (or evangelism), understood not as an attempt to control history for the ends we believe to be good, but as the responsibility to witness to Christ—and accept the suffering such witness entails. (I, 27–28)

As McClendon demonstrates, Biblicism in any flat or totalized sense cannot be the integral motif, as all Christian traditions locate themselves within Scriptural authority: “what separated the Anabaptists from their persecutors was more than the courage to draw an inference” (I, 28). Moreover, Biblicism has the terrible possibility of bibliolatry, where by contrast, the baptism vision refocuses the Bible as a book concerning how believers are to be God’s people (I, 31). Liberty, while it accurately describes the baptist insistence on the voluntary believers’ church, cannot form the integrative motif, since, for McClendon, liberty has been made into a more modernistic notion of autonomy through, for instance, the doctrine of “soul competency” in E. Y. Mullins’ work (I, 29). Discipleship similarly is deeply important for Anabaptists (faith is not faith without following Christ), but again does not fully encompass all aspects of the baptist identity (I, 29).¹⁹ Community, namely the attempt to reconstitute the “true church,” has been

¹⁹ McClendon does not offer much of a reason for this at this point, but we can infer that it is because followers of Christ often fail to do so. To forget this is to fall into legalism, the great temptation of Anabaptism. The baptism vision allows not only a disciple’s successful obedience to be illuminated, but also a disciple’s imperfections, failures, struggles, and doubts.

important for Anabaptists (such as Littell).²⁰ However, this assumes a complete fall of the church, which McClendon insists is inaccurate: there were missteps, but no complete fall (I, 55). Baptists are merely a different “mode” within the church catholic. Finally, witness is important, although it has never been considered an all-encompassing motif (I, 30). So, while different theologians have offered each distinctive as the definitive, unifying motif of baptist theology, McClendon insists that these cannot do so in and of themselves. The baptist vision is the more fundamental distinctive that organizes these others.

We should point out that this is no exhaustive list for all the modern proposals for baptist identity, but most others fit into this five-fold scheme. Nevertheless, it is the practice of reading, listening to, and living Scripture that has led baptists to conclude their selection from among the specific distinctives as the heart of baptist identity.

3. *Figural reading has led baptists to conclude different distinctives from those that characterize other Christians.* McClendon notes that this is no special or exclusive claim to an alternative revelation or spiritual experience that other Christians have not had (I, 26). Rather, this is a modest claim that baptists have merely read and seen something different in the same Bible and sought to exist within the wider church faithfully, despite inherent contestation of these claims. A good example of these is the separation of church and state, as well as baptism.

For example, the conviction of the separation of church and state was arrived at using the “this is that” dynamic. Where the Reformers appealed to the Old Testament to legitimate their close connections to the state, Roger Williams (to use McClendon’s example) used arguments for the separation of church and state as he interpreted the Old Testament theocracy through Christ (II, 486). Since Christ is the sole authority in religion, one is at liberty to follow this regardless of the laws of a country or even one’s religious community (if said community is not

²⁰ See Littell, *The Anabaptist View*.

being authentic). The interpreter has the liberty to interpret as the Spirit leads. McClendon insists, “to translate the Old Testament theocracy into a pattern for the wide world has grievous consequences for Christian and world” (I, 166); “Christ authorizes no armies, levies no taxes, indeed, exercises no authority save by the persuasion of suffering love” (II, 180). The church is to be its own autonomous entity, not utilizing political power for religious ends, but influencing the world to choose Christ and his way by love, even by martyrdom, but not by force.²¹

Similarly, baptism and typology form a close mutual tie. All baptists, including McClendon, see believer’s baptism as a central remembering sign, the namesake of the tradition.²² Following a typological pattern, baptism is for adults, as Christ was baptized when he was ready to begin his ministry (I, 267). Baptism, as it is described in Scripture, seems to spring from a freely chosen faith coupled with the act of repentance and regeneration.²³ Anabaptists and Baptists have differed on the mode, whether immersion or aspersion.²⁴ For McClendon, it is the event of repentance where the person’s story and the biblical story converge and fuse in the company of the community (I, 267). He writes,

New Testament baptism was neither a benign welcome to human existence, nor a rite of passage to adolescence, nor a viaticum offering safe conduct to an afterlife, but rather was the commissioning of those who by resurrection light took up the way of Jesus of Nazareth—the way of the cross—when they did in fact take it up! (I, 269)

²¹ It should be noted that Nigel Wright, following McClendon’s work, productively expands separation of church and state into a more comprehensive distinctive, showing its relationship to all other points of ecclesiology. For him, the baptist vision is for a church free of state control, able to worship God authentically, and a society free from church control, which entails the church to renounce all Constantinian power and manipulation to advance itself, taking on a way of powerlessness and vulnerability. See Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, xviii.

²² As argued in Edward Hamilton Erwin, “Baptismal Ethics in a Baptist Ecclesiology: Developments and Departures from the Theology of James McClendon, Jr.” (Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, 1992).

²³ For perhaps the strongest modern exegetical defense of believer’s baptism by immersion, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

²⁴ For two historical studies in the meaning of baptism in Anabaptist and Baptists traditions, see Rollin Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism* (Kitchener: Herald, 1966), as well as Stanley K. Fowler, *More than a Symbol: The British Recovery of Baptist Sacramentalism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007), chs. 1–2.

Baptists have looked at Scripture and concluded on a different way of baptism than what many other traditions typically have espoused. Typological reading of the New Testament factored heavily into this interpretation.

As with all the traits, the marks of the baptist identity help to structure and add further stability to the baptist vision, orienting the vision. Also, figural interpretation lends further plausibility to doctrines such as believer's baptism. Yet the question is still unresolved as to why baptists have concluded differently from others (this will come up again).

4. *The baptist vision is unique as it assumes the free-church ecclesiology (and the other distinctives of baptist identity) as the site of typological reading.* The baptist vision is a way of reading the Bible in a “this is that, then is now” fashion that includes certain biblical practices regarding the nature of the church and where and how interpretation is physically done, such as the nature of the gathered church, the Rules of Christ and Paul, binding and loosing, the centrality of preaching, and how the text connects with the past.

Among these is the notion of the gathered church, in which the presence of Christ is where “two or three are gathered” (Matt. 18:20). This is the bedrock of the free-church vision of congregational governance (III, 379).²⁵ There is also a similarity to the “Rule of Paul” offered in 1 Cor. 14:26–29, where the community is called to deliberate on the statements of a prophet. These principles speak of the Spirit-led authority of the assembled community to judge on matters of faith and forgiveness.²⁶ All are permitted to offer their voices (preaching from the biblical text) as the Spirit leads, regardless of office, and the community is called to deliberate

²⁵ For a full description of this style of ecclesiology see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁶ However, John Howard Yoder offered detailed accounts of this in his essay, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 15–45.

and decide on what teachings to “bind” and “loose” together (III, 379, cf. Matt. 18). The baptist communal, non-hierarchical, pneumatic ethos was formed through these passages.

In baptist life, as McClendon observes, preaching takes an important role, orienting the worship (II, 384). As H. Stephen Shoemaker as pointed out, preaching is itself a central site of biblical interpretation for the baptist community. This practice of preaching involves preaching for new creation and conversion, as an act of liberty from secular powers, as a combination of “intellectual rigor” with “evangelical warmth,” as a Christocentric, both communal and individualistic in focus, and, ultimately, this is done as a counter-cultural act.²⁷

The free-church tradition is one that is not hierarchically organized, much less reliant on authorities—whether those of tradition, religious hierarchies, or state policy—to guarantee its continuity with the original disciples of Jesus. McClendon states,

A misunderstanding may be avoided by contrasting the present sense of “the church now is the apostolic church” with a possible Catholic sense of those very words. The latter requires some notion of succession and therefore of legitimate development. But successionism is close to heresy in baptist eyes though embraced by a few, and development conveys in the view of some a claim to inevitable progress more at home in nineteenth-century liberalism than in the thought world of the New Testament. The baptist “is” in “this is that” is therefore neither developmental nor successionist, but mystical and immediate; it might be better understood by the artist and poet than by the metaphysician or dogmatist. (I, 32)

In free-church ecclesiology, a conviction is valid not by its pedigree or validation by authorities, but by its demonstration of lived faithfulness to Christ.

Barry Harvey worries that the “this is that” forms a hermeneutic that is too univocal, failing to discern cultural and historical distance.²⁸ However, for McClendon historical distance is the beginning place from which the reader opens him or herself up to Christ speaking now.

²⁷ H. Stephen Shoemaker, “How baptists Read the Bible,” in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision*, 125–29.

²⁸ Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 52.

McClendon is not so historically naïve as to try to literally reconstruct the early church today²⁹ (as some conservative Anabaptists seem to attempt with reinstitutions of head-coverings or disavowals of technology), but rather to observe a Christ-like pattern in the Bible, applicable today through the mystical, typological connection discerned in a spirit-led community.³⁰

5. *The baptist vision is unique as it is nursed by the traditions of practices produced by the Anabaptists, Baptists, and other radicals.* This admits that hearing God’s voice in Scripture is nursed by certain elements that make interpretations plausible (thus, as we mentioned, this creates an “elective affinity” between community and interpretation). McClendon writes, without the reader’s

situation and its practice, it [the text] has no “literal” meaning; rather it literally has no meaning...while there may be an unlimited number of *possible* meanings for a set of English words strung into a grammatical sentence, there are only as many actual meanings as there are uses of those words in spoken (or written) practice. (CW2, 262)

Brendon Neilson goes so far as to see this as an “aesthetic” for reading.³¹ The Baptist tradition or set of traditions (as we will later explore), is polymorphous, polygenetic, less-institutional, usually more centered on persons, and is composed of a loose set of doctrinal conclusions (such as the separation of church and state, believer’s baptism, less-sacramental interpretations of

²⁹ Grenz and Franke pointed out, citing John Jefferson Davis and Stanley Gundry, that modernist notions of biblical authority fail to realize that the statements of the Bible offer contextual claims that must be understood in historical context and also re-contextualized. See Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 15.

³⁰ McClendon’s friend and theological partner, John Howard Yoder, wrote on this topic, “It is neither possible nor necessarily desirable to reproduce in detail specific social structures of another age; to this the generally pejorative label ‘primitivist’ points. Yet such a label is very blunt weapon. It gives us no help in explaining why preaching should be biblical, or why doctrine should be tested by scripture, and church order not; unless one assumes, with Luther but clearly against scripture itself, a difference of kind between the dogmatic and the social. Why should it be assumed that church order is the one area in which the New Testament is not normative?” in Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ: Paul’s Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin: Brethren, 1987), 86.

³¹ Brendon Neilson, “The baptist Imagination of James McClendon,” *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 7.2 (2011): 23–38. Neilson argues that the vision offers a kind of “aesthetic” for reading the biblical text. The vision may function that way, but McClendon never used the category of “aesthetic.” This action of reading canonically, Christocentrically, in the church, in order to “live” Christ, constitutes a particularized “Christian” theory of reader-response, similar to the account given in Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

communion, etc.). These practices and convictions help form a hermeneutical circle by which interpretation is constructed.

For instance, while the call to nonviolent witness is heard from Scripture addressing the church at present, in turn this affects the reading of Scripture, forming governing concerns for interpretation. Yoder has argued that pacifism is something that, as believers practice it, makes fuller sense.³² In fact, pacifism offers a kind of epistemology or way of knowing in this regard. Thus, nonviolent witness forms a hermeneutical lens for biblical theology. This is seen in the work of Anabaptist theologians such as J. Denny Weaver, who has taken this pacifist lens and used it to argue for resolute Christocentric theologies.³³ While there is a danger that the practice might gloss Scripture with interpretive assumptions, all interpretation is situated this way. The hope is that these assumptions are authentic to the Christian faith.

Edward Erwin offers his reason why baptism is connected with typology in the free-church tradition. Baptism, biblical interpretation, and the believer's church (the distinctive of liberty) form an integral connection:

Not only does believer's baptism interpret the biblical story and locate baptism within that story, it performs church, and, for that matter, a particular kind of church. While believer's baptism is an interpretation of the biblical story and an interpretation of the church, believer's baptism is also a performative story and a performative community.... Without believer's baptism there can be no believer's church.³⁴

³² John Howard Yoder, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning," in *The Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology*, ed. Ted Grimsrud and Christian E. Early (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), ch. 6.

³³ See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); and Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). Weaver has produced a provocative argument that the non-violent cross of Christ, which is germane to the Anabaptist tradition, can form a hermeneutic of sorts to interpret the rest of the Bible's imagery, whether the atonement or the Book of Revelation. The success of such an approach cannot be weighed here, but its notoriety can be stated as an example for the present point.

³⁴ Edward Hamilton Erwin, "Baptismal Ethics in a Baptist Ecclesiology: Developments and Departures from the Theology of James McClendon, Jr.," 370.

Undoubtedly, McClendon does see authentic believers within other non-baptistic traditions, and thus, Erwin's comment is perhaps overzealous. Nevertheless, Erwin correctly sees baptism as a hermeneutical precondition for the "this is that" dynamic in the baptist vision, as well as a product of it.

The baptist vision forms the practices and the practices nurse the vision. McClendon summarizes:

First of all the awareness of the *biblical* story as our story, but also the *liberty* as the duty to obey God without state help or hindrance, of *discipleship* as life transformed into obedience to Jesus' lordship, of *community* as daily sharing in the vision, and of *mission* as responsibility for costly witness. (I, 34)

In this way, these distinctives add body, as it were, to the baptist identity. Thus, the vision is linked to the various secondary practices that characterize baptists. These characteristics are secondary and fallible, and some baptists do not share theirs with others. Nevertheless, these practices aid in the reading of Scripture in a baptist way.

6. *The baptist vision understands itself through (but is not bound to) the historical reflection baptists have had on the nature of Scripture and how it is to be interpreted.* For example, McClendon references insights from different baptist confessions and teachers with regards to the nature and interpretation of Scripture. McClendon cites the first American Baptist confession from 1665 (by Thomas Gould's congregation) to point out that there is a strand of baptist identity that sees Scripture as "the rule of this knowledge [*sic*] faith & obedience *Concerning the worship and service of God & all other Christian duties.*"³⁵ As biblical inerrancy developed into its modern form, it "became less a book of types than a book of information; it was no longer so much a criterial authority *of* shared practices as an informative authority *on*

³⁵ II, 473 (italics McClendon's), citing H. Shelton Smith, Robert Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents* (2 vols; New York: Scribner's, 1960) 1:168.

faith and practice” (II, 474). In other words, the direct truth of Scripture for living out Christ was side-tracked by the modern obsession with securing the historicity of its statements.

Christ is the central interpretive criterion for Scripture in a unique way in baptist history. McClendon cites Bernard Rothmann, who stated, “An interpretation is reliable if it leads to behaviour that conforms to Christ. If such behaviour is not there, Scripture has not been understood” (II, 473).³⁶ This also means a certain understanding of how the Testaments fit together, as the New Testament in Christ takes interpretive priority.³⁷ This is central, again, to baptist arguments for pacifism, baptism, etc. Thus, the vision positions Christ as the center of Scripture, its interpretation, and its application.³⁸

7. Following number six, *typology frees believers from both the pitfalls of flat Biblicism and historical-critical reading*. McClendon sees the simple phenomenon of the Scriptures speaking to the present as a better statement of what the Bible is and does than any doctrine of Scripture. He writes,

I believe this hermeneutic indicates the proximate authority of Scripture better than recent catchwords, such as “inerrant” or “infallible,” or “historical-critical,” or “literary” can ever do. I have no passion to reject these other words.... But they are not enough. A Julia Child cookbook can be inerrant; the *Cambridge Modern History* can be historical-critical; but neither is Scripture, for neither requires for its reading the prophetic—that is, the baptist—vision. How does this vision work in the reading of Scripture? Consider the resurrection of Christ as related to the Gospels. Sophisticated inerrancy theory tells us to take every word of the Gospels, including the resurrection accounts, seriously, as truth. Historical critics tell us the Gospels are *Ostgeschichte*, that is, written in resurrection light. So far, both are correct. But inerrantists and historical critics alike may still go to their churches and say their prayers to a distant deity, perhaps in the end relying on some fragment of “religious

³⁶ Bernard Rothmann, “Restitution,” in *Anabaptism in Outline*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Waterloo: Herald, 1981), 150. One should note that Rothmann continues on, against how McClendon appropriates him as offering a hermeneutic to govern plurality of doctrine, to say, “his will is so clearly expressed in the Scriptures that no glosses or interpretation necessary.”

³⁷ For instance, the “Bern Colloquy” of 1538, in *Anabaptism in Outline*, 150–51.

³⁸ Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora, 2000). Murray notes that Anabaptists have tended to follow a hermeneutic that (1) is plain as the Bible interprets itself, (2) is Christocentric, (3) sees the New Testament as interpreting the Old, (4) reads the biblical text in the Spirit, and (5) binds interpretations in the congregation as its members read together.

experience” to preserve their lives from utter barrenness. Now enter the baptist vision. It tell us that the story then is the story now; that the Christ who rose then, truly rose and appeared to the disciples in the breaking of bread, is present now and does appear to us. (CW1, 123–24)

However, it seems that in other places McClendon was less cordial to biblical inerrantists. For McClendon, the theologies of biblical inerrancy that culminated in the Chicago Statement in 1978 were problematic.³⁹ “In a word, ingenious inerrancy theorists managed to withdraw all the bizarre factual claims their theory seemed to require” (II, 475). He goes on to state,

[they affirmed] the entire Bible as the authoritative, inerrant Word of God—so that church doctrine is simply “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” However, this turns out not to work very well since (1) this primary affirmation about the role of Scripture is not itself part of Scripture, but can only be another doctrine added to it; (2) nor does Scripture provide the canon of Scripture, which appeared only later; and in fact (3) historic Fundamentalism with its “five points” or the like is no more willing than Roman Catholic teaching to let the “Bible and the Bible only” speak. (II, 25)

He saw some forms of biblical inerrancy as almost authoritarian, as they legitimated the notion that theology is un-reformable. This has been a bitter battle in baptist circles such as the Southern Baptist Convention,⁴⁰ but nevertheless, McClendon simply finds strict notions of biblical “inerrancy” to be a foreign concept to what the Bible is. Instead, he sees the baptist vision as a

³⁹ Writings expositing and defending Biblical inerrancy are numerous, but some of the central works on the subject when it rose to prominence are as follows: Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, *The Proceedings of the Conference for Biblical Inerrancy*, 1987 (Nashville: Broadman, 1987); D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Louis Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody, 1949); Norman Geisler, ed. *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word Books, 1979); Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Lindsell, *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961); R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). For a survey of different views on biblical inerrancy see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 255–65. We should note that Pinnock and Ramm developed in their views of inerrancy and the doctrine of Scripture into something more compatible with what McClendon was espousing.

⁴⁰ While the book does not properly understand moderate or liberal approaches to Scripture, the primary historical survey on different Baptist doctrines of Scripture is Tom Nettles and L. Russ Bush, *Baptists and the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999). Also see Helen Dare and Simon Woodman, eds., *The “Plainly Revealed” Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011). For a collection of essays and sermons illustrating a moderate doctrine of Scripture, see Walter Shurden, ed., *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Bible* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1994).

substitute, emphasizing that it is more important how the church reads Scripture than what they necessarily understand Scripture to implicitly be.

Second, on the other extreme, there is the historical-critical approach that in essence paralyzes the text with methodological questions of authorship, composition, sources, dating, etc. Conservatives just as much as liberals have adopted this approach, reducing the Bible to the products of historicist analysis: one to the blanket denial of historicity and literal meaning, the other to the naïve and problematic defense of it. This approach, while a valid dimension of scholarly inquiry in its own right, fails to recommend the move from what the Bible “said” to what it is “saying.” Thus, it fails to engage the whole interpretive act the Bible calls for.

In fact, McClendon is skillful at showing that historical-critical readings of the text necessitate the baptist vision as a part of the text’s intention. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:21, the Deuteronomist asks the question, “Why keep these laws?” The answer is that “We were Pharaoh’s slaves, and the LORD brought us out.” Of course, accepting the consensus of textual criticism puts the time of the Deuteronomist much later than the initial generation of the Exodus (II, 466). The writer or final editor then naturally saw his or her generation in the biblical story, the past as present, confirming the “this is that” dynamic. Historical-critical work, by its concern for accuracy and care, can cause some doctrines to be exposed as sloppy and naïve. However, if it is done in a manner sensitive to how the Bible constructs its own meaning, it can actually complement the baptist vision.

McClendon attempts to move between these extremes. He states that “Fundamentalists have not been fundamental enough and Liberals have not been liberal enough to hear all the Bible’s words as words for them” (I, 31). As he explains, it is the narrative figures of Scripture that are taken up and lived by the community that is the primary referent of Scripture. This

nevertheless leaves open certain questions about the nature of reference and historical reliability, which we will revisit in a later chapter.

McClendon seeks to move baptists beyond the battles over inerrancy and historical criticism by focusing the debate on how Scripture speaks and ought to be interpreted in the church. This is a commendable effort. He chooses not to give a separate account of how inspiration works, or a doctrine of Scripture. While this is a therapeutic move, McClendon still could have delineated concepts such as inspiration,⁴¹ how the term the “Word of God” appears in the Bible,⁴² various terms for revelation and their meanings,⁴³ and the nature of error.⁴⁴ We need not delineate them here, since that goes beyond the scope of what McClendon treats, but it should be emphasized that failing to treat them does not shipwreck McClendon’s project. McClendon would probably point out that the church could make do just fine with a meaningful *practice* of Scripture rather than a potentially cumbersome *doctrine* of Scripture. Nevertheless, McClendon could have offered a precise doctrine of Scripture with his account of typological practice.

⁴¹ See for instance, Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ch. 14. Inspiration, as Grenz comments on 2 Tim. 3:16, is for the purpose of producing salvation and righteousness. Inspiration refers to the intended message of the Spirit. He also points out that the term *theopneustos* alludes to the breath of God that brought Adam to life in Genesis 2, thus linking the inspiration of Scripture with its soteriological and not its epistemological aspects: it need not be perfectly historically precise in order for it to communicate salvation.

⁴² The term “the Word of God” definitively refers to Christ (John 1:1; Heb. 4:12), but often refers broadly to a prophetic message received by a prophet (e.g. Luke 5:1) or the apostolic proclamation, whether the gospel message itself or a prophetic message (Acts 4:21; 1 Thess. 2:13). This would mean that Scripture as proclaimed to believers is the Word of God, but the Word of God is not necessarily limited to the canonical Scripture (the canon, however, obviously having a regulatory function over other received messages).

⁴³ For a treatment of the terms in the Old and New Testament, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History* (London: Macmillan, 1968). Pannenberg reiterates that revelation primarily refers to the acts of God in history, which disclose who God is. Christ is the sum of this action, and Christ’s identity is enveloped in the apocalyptic disclosure of God’s reign at the end of history, anticipated proleptically in the resurrection. Pannenberg, however, generally neglects the biblical text as a site of divine action in the Spirit speaking through it (in which case it therefore is also revelatory) as well as through spiritual gifts of prophesy and revelation (e.g. Eph. 1:17; 1 Cor. 14:6, 26–33).

⁴⁴ See Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 402. Grenz notes that to be in error in Scripture usually means wrongdoing (Ps. 95:10; James 5:20) or to deny the core of God’s identity (1 John 4:6).

8. *The baptist vision, as the tradition has shown, displays a high proclivity toward holding convictions to be fallible and revisable.* McClendon does not see the vision as a magic formula or certain foundation for theology. When, as he comments,

(at one extreme) the Bible remains a cold icon, relegated to symbolic significance, or when (at the other) it is made a graven idol, a “paper pope,” receiving the more homage the more it is misread.... Such diversity in Bible use and misuse underlines the point made above: every practice is vulnerable to perversion. (II, 35)

The vision is profoundly aware that baptist tradition has failed in the past and often cannot prevent all perversions of itself. Other baptists, such as Glen Stassen and David Gushee, insist this is Christ’s own attitude towards tradition, which was one of fallibility and prophetic revision.⁴⁵ Thus baptist tradition holds the notion of tradition itself up to the “this is that” dynamic. This leads to what some might see as the “anti-traditional” bent in baptist thought, which holds unnecessary and non-biblically based convictions to be always fallible, especially if traditional beliefs end in upholding the status quo. However, McClendon does not dismiss all traditioned thinking, seeing the baptist tradition, among other “monuments of tradition,” as “hermeneutical aids” (II, 471); but tradition is nevertheless fallible and revisable and thus does not “monopolize the voice of God in Scripture” (II, 468). The question of tradition will be taken up in more detail later.

This also points forward, as the present church is the primitive church as well as the future church on judgment day. This means interpreting Scripture in a kind of pneumatic tradition,⁴⁶ which is prevalent in baptist thought. McClendon does not use this language, but

⁴⁵ This is stated in Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), chap. 4.

⁴⁶ Dunn sketches out the features of the pneumatic tradition that the apostles used to interpret the Old Testament and even Jesus’ own words. Teachings were always examined in light of the resurrected Jesus, applied in different contexts through the law of Christ or law of love. See James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 71–75: “Kerygmatic tradition for Paul then was interpreted tradition—interpreted in the light of his own encounter with the risen Jesus” (71); “[a teaching] was authoritative not because it was a

baptists have characteristically read for “further light.” When Congregationalist baptists first came to North America aboard the Mayflower, they were commissioned under the speech of John Robinson, who stated, “I charge you before God and his blessed angels that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow Christ. If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”⁴⁷ Of course, this is not to say this revisionist approach cannot be perverted also, as Curtis Freeman notes.⁴⁸ This merely observes the kind of experimental liberty characteristic of the baptist tradition, whether good or bad.

Concerns: As we scratch the surface to see what lies underneath the simple “this is that” approach, we see important questions. First, we must ask this about typology: With typology situating itself to be an alternative to historical criticism, does typology dismiss the claim that a text is historical or naïvely uphold the Bible’s historical content?⁴⁹ How can a literary approach yield theological advances (that is, whatever way doctrine can be stated better) that the historical-critical approach could not? Can a literary approach to eschatology help the theologian

tradition but because it was received and accepted on the direct authority of the exalted one” (72). Also, Dunn states, “it would appear then that [Paul] regards the ethical tradition drawn from the traditions about Jesus not as a series of *laws* which have to be obeyed *whatever* the circumstances, but more as a set of *principles* which have to be *applied in the light of* the circumstances.... [It is] tradition which has to be interpreted under the guidance of the Spirit and followed only in so far as it is recognized to be a direction of the Spirit” (73–74).

⁴⁷ Alexander Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth, from 1602 to 1625* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1841), 87, 396–97. Baptists, as they appeared in Canada, emerged as part of the “New Lighter” movement. See Harry Renfree, *Heritage & Horizon: The Baptist Story in Canada* (Mississauga: Canadian Baptist Federation, 1988), 10–38. This movement was initiated particularly by the work of Henry Alline; see James Beverley and Barry Moody, eds., *The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline* (Hantsport: Lancelot, 1982); George A. Rawlyk, ed., *The New Light Letters and Spiritual Songs, 1778–1793* (Hantsport: Lancelot, 1983); and Rawlyk, ed., *The Sermons of Henry Alline* (Hantsport: Lancelot, 1986).

⁴⁸ Curtis W. Freeman links the baptist vision to the baptist tendency to read for “further light” but acknowledges the potential for missteps in *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 298.

⁴⁹ This criticism has been voiced by Thomas Finger, who feels that the “this is that” dynamic “overleaps the historical process in some sense.” See Thomas Finger, “McClendon’s Theology Reaches Completion: A Review Essay,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 76 no. 1 (2002): 123.

to articulate the doctrine better (however “better” can be defined)? What other applications of this literary structure are there? What other criteria are there to ensure that typology is done virtuously? The second set of questions regards baptist identity: Is the free-church approach a biblically viable approach? More pointedly, can it make sense of all the developments of tradition, extra-biblical, bad as well as good? Can it make sense of the plurality of expressions that doctrines take on? After all, while many authentic, non-baptist Christians use typology, not all hold to believer’s baptism. What is the historical nature of the Anabaptist-Baptist connection? If the baptists read the text plainly, why have other traditions not concluded the same about matters like believer’s baptism? Can the radical, diverse, often divided baptist churches claim to affirm the catholic heritage of the faith? These are questions we will take up again later.

The baptist vision arose out of, and for, the baptist community. McClendon sees it as characteristic of how baptists (as well as other Christians) have used Scripture meaningfully. This appears to be the case as McClendon shows that this is how Scripture often interprets Scripture. McClendon proposes this vision as a unifying foundation to baptist identity, reflecting the practical mode baptists tend toward. It attempts to employ the rich practice and resources in baptist tradition to situate and nurture interpretation.

3.4 Conclusion

For McClendon, to read Scripture as a baptist ideally means to read for the “this is that” dynamic as the way Scripture understands itself and as the way the church listens to the Bible today. It is to be aware of the complex, textual intention of how the biblical writers saw the past as present and anticipating a future, as well as how baptists have heard God’s voice in Scripture. The baptist vision means to read the text as speaking today, as if “the church then is the church now as it is on judgment day.” It is to read the text highly Christocentrically. It is to read it from

the site of the baptist community, with its own sensibilities priming the reader for a certain affinity or plausibility of interpretations. This is a prophetic act, perhaps more mystical than other traditions that attempt to claim comparable legitimacy by a form of succession. This, of course, raises important questions about the nature of this form of typology (its application and criteria) as well as the nature of the baptist identity (its catholicity and historiography).

Chapter 4: A Three-Strand Story

“There is no other test that I know of. We shall all have to decide what Jesus would do...” [said Henry Maxwell.] All the faces in the room were raised toward the minister in solemn assent.... They remained a little longer talking over details and asking questions, and agreed to report to one another every week at a similar meeting the results of following Jesus this way. Henry Maxwell prayed again. And again as before the Spirit made Himself manifest.

- Charles Sheldon¹

Charles Sheldon knew well what McClendon saw as the “anastatic,” the resurrection power of in the midst of the community. As we have already noted, the baptist vision presents a typological approach where the biblical text is read in a “this is that” manner where the church sees the present community as the primitive church as well as the eschatological. This implies that the existence portrayed in the biblical narrative is as real as it is livable. In this chapter, we will explore how this vision is further supported by a three-strand (or three-sphered) narrative ethic. This narrative ethic functions much like a metaphysical account or ontology.² These three strands are the bodily, the social, and the anastatic (i.e., related to the resurrection). McClendon sees the acts of God’s redemption as corresponding to three strands of reality, which in turn loosely correspond to the structure of narrative itself. This gives the reader an overall framework for understanding how the Bible can be read in a “this is that” manner. Moreover, baptists, according to McClendon, are anastatically oriented in their soteriology, a detail we will unpack. The baptist vision, through a three strand account, is given ontological reality through the narrative, also structuring different doctrines and texts, as well as giving an account of how baptists are oriented in that story.

First, we will note the concerns of some theologians in regards to narrative theology and metaphysical groundings. Some theologians worry that some narrative theologies lack a

¹ Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Uhrichville: Barbour, 1984), 18–19.

² From their Greek terms, metaphysics or metaphysical inquiry can be described as an inquiry into the nature of nature. Ontology, similarly, can be described as the study or an account of Being or existence.

metaphysic, and thus de-actualize God's identity. This concern will be stated up front here, but it also applies to our next chapter, which is where we will revisit it as it pertains to Christology and the Trinity. Second, we will argue that McClendon has a minimal metaphysic, derivable from his three-strand ethic: bodily, social, and anastatic. Third, we will see how this three-strand account is formed from the nature of narrative itself, and therefore is realistic to God's ongoing action in history. In doing so, we will see that through the anastatic dimension, McClendon is offering a narrative ontology of redeemed life. Fourth, we will investigate the specific theological dimensions of this narrative metaphysic. These theological categories will further expand the strands, showing that this is a metaphysic both derived from Scripture and also used to organize its themes.

4.1 The Danger of Narrative Theology without a Metaphysic

Critics of narrative theology argue that narrative theology fictionalizes or "mythologizes" God. Two theologians that have offered such criticism of other narrative theologians are Kevin Vanhoozer and Francesca Murphy. We will answer this criticism in this chapter as well as the next.

Kevin Vanhoozer sees reading Scripture without a metaphysic as condemning Scripture to an incoherent presentation of God's identity, which he regards as condemning Scripture to mythology. He notes that Scripture seems to condemn the category of myth, whether in the form of a traditional narrative of supernatural (and often imaginary) persons, or in the form of a story communicating higher truths.³ To merely read Scripture attentive to its literary structures is to ultimately do what Jack Miles does in *God: A Biography*, where God is reduced to a composite

³ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

protagonist of the stories of the Old Testament, a bundle of narrative identities and nothing more.⁴

Instead, Vanhoozer recommends reading Scripture as a *mythos* of divine action, an emplotted presentation of the triune drama.⁵ The *mythos* renders a metaphysic of unified identity and action through the polyphony of canonical displays. A metaphysic, for Vanhoozer (borrowing W. Norris Clarke's definition), is "the great general laws and principles governing all beings and rendering them intelligible, including what it means to be real at all,"⁶ and it is through certain central biblical concepts—like the Creator-creation distinction—that a metaphysical reflection on the divine identity can be constructed. Vanhoozer uses the Creator-creation distinction, derived from Scripture, to legitimate a metaphysic of impassibility, which he in turn uses to read Scripture.

The second major critic of narrative theology is Francesca Murphy. Murphy is concerned that narrative theology reduces theology from talking *about* God to talking *about talking about* God. God is not a being so much as a narrative character. In criticism of Hans Frei, the reduction (as Murphy sees it) of God to an identity presented in the narrative means God cannot be thought of as sufficiently real. She writes:

narrative identity is not strong enough to anchor a particular presence, because it is not physically embodied. It gives us the idea of the resurrected Christ. But, it does not point us along the way to the resurrected body of Jesus, as seen by Mary Magdalene and the other apostles.⁷

As she states earlier, "Narrative theology fails to renounce foundationalism because it thinks of

⁴ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 9.

⁵ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 24.

⁶ W. Norris Clarke, "Fifty Years of Metaphysical Reflection: The Universe as Journey," in Gerald McCool, ed., *The Universe as Journey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), 56, quoted in Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 25.

⁷ Francesca Murphy, *God is Not a Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.

Christ as an *identity* rather than as an *existent*.”⁸ Narrative identity traps God in the text, rather than enabling God to be demonstrated in reality. These criticisms are applicable for McClendon, who is strongly influenced by Frei. In the next chapter, we will see that McClendon offers a two-narrative theology, but that is but one aspect, and not an answer to Murphy. Do all narrative approaches dismiss the reality of which they speak?

Murphy’s solution is an old-fashioned, Thomistic metaphysic that is able to rationally argue for God’s existence. She insists,

It matters to prove that God exists because knowing that God is gives an existential input into what we say about God. We prove it so that our language about God will not be mere stipulation but ordered toward the Person who orders creation. The existence of moves, designs, causes, and perfections, is the material from which we make statements about God.⁹

Now, again, this is not the place to assess Murphy’s proposals in depth,¹⁰ but her warnings are well taken. God cannot be reduced to a narrative identity without reality. However, there are other ways to prevent this other than through Thomistic metaphysics and its accompanying philosophical discourse. What if the structure of narrative itself offers the best categories for apprehending the divine existence and action?

Both these theologians argue that the only secure approach through which to interpret the biblical narrative is through a metaphysic, whether a doctrine of impassibility (deduced from the Creator-creation distinction) or purity of being (borrowed from the Thomistic tradition). McClendon sees the grounding of theology in a philosophical discourse to be deeply suspect, but

⁸ Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 63.

⁹ Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 131.

¹⁰ William Placher, review of *God is Not a Story*, Francesca Murphy, *Modern Theology* 24.3 (July 2008), 511–13. Here Placher warns that Murphy overtly sees God as a philosophical category of Being over and against God’s being displayed in Christ, since she writes, “Our language for saying that the very *nature* or *essence* of God was exhibited through the incarnation stumbles at once, for our word for God is ‘Being’, and it’s far from obvious that Jesus preached or did ‘being’ in his life, death, and resurrection” (Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 284).

does use narrative categories in his ethical approach in a way that that offers an ontology to understand the realities of Scripture.

4.2 A Narrative Pragmatist

In response to these concerns, we will show that McClendon's three-strand account of ethical action does function very much like a minimal metaphysic as it encompasses at once divine action, the ordering of creation, and human life for the baptist vision. McClendon offers his metaphysic through the mode of ethical reflection, which means that McClendon is best characterized as a narrative pragmatist,¹¹ grounded in the language of Scripture and the practices of community. The biblical story is ontologically meaningful and its truth forms character in community, which in turn reads that narrative.

What McClendon generally deems an ethic, we can also see as a metaphysic. McClendon sees this ethical theory as offering an account of life itself (including God, creation, and humans), under the pragmatic criterion of whether it is lived rightly. Ethics is an all-encompassing field for McClendon that works with an ontology (or a set of ontological-ethical categories) derived from the biblical narrative. He writes,

The upshot of the whole matter is that three-stranded biblical or Christian ethics as here presented is none other than the critical analysis of the moral life of those who share in a certain ongoing real story—a story whose link with its primitive past is established by anamnesis or memory, and whose link with its final end is fixed by the anticipation or hope of the sharers of the Way. It is important to recall that in this way of speaking, *ethics itself is not a story and does not tell a story*; rather it investigates, analyzes, criticizes a way of life, a morality, that is itself story-formed. (I, 330)

Thus, ethics for McClendon is an analysis of the lived story of believers and their God, which involves offering an account of the structures and truths that allow for believers to live rightly.

¹¹ We will define pragmatism as any approach that evaluates the success (completely or partially) of a conviction by its practical dimensions and consequences. As we will see, this is similar but distinct from the American philosophical movement that began with William James and others.

“Truth...is in practice narrative-dependent” (I, 345). Ontology is discussed through ethics as the biblical narrative is at once real insofar as it is intended for ethical instruction. Thus, ethics is the mode by which the ontology present in the biblical narrative is investigated.

While the Thomistic ways have much to be commended, it is the biblical narrative that offers the justification for Christian belief, both in the text and in how the church today is a continuation of that story. Thus McClendon writes, “We come to the question of (philosophical) justification of such an ethics from an exact standpoint: it is *this* ethics that must be justified; *this* narrative style that must be found valid” (I, 331). The highest demonstration for Christian belief is whether Christians have successfully walked with Christ, emulating the narrative of the cross. Justification is bound to ethics as truth is displayed in witness.

Now, McClendon seems reluctant to call his ethical theory an ontology (although he calls the anastatic strand “metaphysical” in CW, 198), and he would tend towards a more pragmatic approach for a few reasons. First, he has an Anabaptist emphasis on the practical (which we have previously noted). Second, he is also a critical follower of the Social Gospel Baptists, where the “Social Gospel,” says Walter Rauschenbusch, “is above all things practical. It needs religious ideas, which will release energy for heroic opposition against organized evil and for the building of a righteous social life.”¹² (Rauschenbusch also proposed a similarly three-tiered account of sin having sensual, social and God-oriented levels, an account to which McClendon seems to be indebted; cf. II, 129).¹³ Third, McClendon is also very much an American theologian schooled in pragmatism. While certainly not a pragmatist like William James¹⁴ (although McClendon was

¹² Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1917), 42.

¹³ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 47. Also, while McClendon does not cite Douglas Clyde MacIntosh, it seems apparent that his pragmatist approach has also influenced him. See MacIntosh, *The Reaction Against Metaphysics in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1911).

¹⁴ See his major works in William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000) or *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

well versed in James),¹⁵ his approach explicitly prefers the pragmatic dimensions of the linguistic analysis in Austin and Wittgenstein, which ironically led him to be more resolutely centered on the biblical narrative and the practices of the baptist community.

Any reflection on the created order is a practice in itself, and this practice is governed by communal criteria. A reflection on this life for McClendon yields three aspects of the church's life: the way, watch-care, and witness, which correspond to the three strands. Ontological reflection grows out of reflection on the life with Christ in his community, and so, the order of these sections follows McClendon's rationale, moving from church to theory. While we have not yet gotten to the three strands, here are the three moral aspects of the believing community (note that the Scriptures discussed are the ones McClendon offers):

1. *Way (Bodily)*: While this image is placed in the anastatic aspect of salvation (which we will treat in Chapter Seven), Christian life as "following the way" seems to correspond here to the embodied obedience of members of the community. As the patriarchs sojourned, so Israel was called to journey in faith. Isaiah uses this metaphor several times (Isa. 40:1–5; 59:8). Jeremiah promises that God will bring people into "singleness of heart and one way of life" (Jer. 32:39). John the Baptist quotes Malachi in exhorting Israel to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:3). Romans speaks of strangers "to the path of peace" (Rom. 3:17). This understanding of ongoing life in obedience combines morality with destiny (I, 50). Believers seek to emulate the figure of Jesus' body, his death and therefore aspects of his resurrection.

2. *Watch-Care (Social)*: Watch-care is the social dimension of walking the way, as this way cannot be walked alone (I, 51). It insists, contra Cain's example, that all believers are brothers and mutual keepers of one another (cf. Gen. 4:9). Several stories make clear the interdependence of individuals and communities in their faithful obedience (Ex. 21:16; 22:5). As

¹⁵ We see evidence of this particularly in his biography of Dag Hammarskjöld in BT, 50.

McClendon points out, this mutual commission of care is inherent in the fact that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:5). This social dimension is presented in Jesus' own summary of the law in "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), as well as in his parables like that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). This dimension is also given in the Sabbath festival practices of the Old Testament and the rules for communion and church discipline in the New Testament.

3. *Witness (Anastatic)*: Finally, witness, while it is a term taken from a legal court (cf. Deut. 17:7), it is applied to those that see the anastatic events of God in Christ, like the resurrection or the Spirit's gifts, and go out and live their testimony (cf. Acts. 1:8, 21; 22:15, etc.). This witness required mission as a way and the watch-care of a new communal life to constitute it, but it also entailed the possibility of martyrdom to testify to the new nonviolent order that was breaking into this world of principalities and powers (I, 54).

As Curtis Freeman notes, McClendon changed the chapters in the second edition of *Ethics*, placing discussion of ethics as the way, watch-care and witness of the community before discussing his theory of ethics as bodily, social, and anastatic strands.¹⁶ He did this to show that ethics comes from the lived dimension of the church community first, and only then can theology go on to theoretical reflection. He is not setting up a metaphysic to be read onto Scripture, but rather a framework that is derived from Scripture, read in community. For this reason, the three strands are derived from these basic theological categories. While we will elaborate on the meaning of these topics shortly, this is merely stated here to insist that the three-strand account (or metaphysic, as we insist) is derived from within the biblical narrative and the life of the church, not imposed on it from outside.

¹⁶ Curtis W. Freeman, "Introduction: Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists," in I, xvii–xviii.

While McClendon did not use philosophical vocabularies such as those of Platonism or existentialism, if he had to pick a philosophical school, was a linguistic pragmatist, albeit one that is so for primarily theological and ecclesial reasons.

4.3 Three Strands: Bodily, Social, and Anastatic

Now we will describe these three strands or spheres: bodily, social, and anastatic. McClendon also preached on these spheres calling them the “nature, culture, and tomorrow” (MGS, 115). As we will see, these strands offer categories for more than just ethical action but also the constitution of the created and redeemed order.

1. *Bodily*: The first strand is the bodily strand. Originally, this was called the *splanchnic* (organic) sphere in an earlier essay, but McClendon renamed it in his later work. This strand is defined as “our organic immersion in the environment, an immersion to which our reaction is emotional before it is rational” (CW2, 20). This strand takes bodily nature to be essentially good and its needs to be relevant for theological consideration.¹ This strand takes seriously the bodily equipment used in moral discernment, such as delight and horror, shame, blame and guilt, conscience and judgment (I, 104–13). Rejecting any hard insistence of *sola gratia* that would see the body as always working at cross-purposes to grace, lacking its own integrity as if grace and human cooperation are a zero-sum game (I, 114), McClendon notes that the body has its own complementary moral equipment. Training these faculties to function properly is not a strictly supernatural endeavor, but rather the culmination of virtues, of excellencies for achieving enjoyment and success in the moral life (I, 114). This strand also takes seriously the goodness of the erotic, which McClendon felt is often downplayed in Augustinian reflection (see I, ch. 5).

¹ While sexual ethics has been a topic for moral theology, the constitution of the body as relevant for ethics has often been neglected. While it is beyond the scope of this project to engage in this topic, it was comprehensively treated in John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). While McClendon would object to the Augustinian perspective of this book, there is much in here that would supplement McClendon’s thoughts on this matter.

The ultimate satisfaction of bodily needs is what McClendon calls “delight” (CW2, 21). While Christians could be called to the pain of crucifixion, many often get burned out because they neglected the need to nourish morality by proper bodily delight.

Presence to others (whether God to humans or humans to one another) is an essential category for moral thought that is downplayed by other theories. The body can sense the presence of God which is essential for the religious life, but being a presence to others often offers the impetus for right action as well. McClendon gives the example of Martin Luther King’s and Clarence Jordan’s solidarity with the pain of their black brothers, coupled with their prophetic sense of God’s presence, as powerful motivators to oppose oppression. Thus, we see an ontology (perhaps “from below”) emerging from organic categories.

2. *Social*: The second is the social strand. This was originally called the *somatic* strand, but again McClendon renamed it. The social strand pertains to the level of life that is organized by practices between organisms (CW2, 21). This is made up of actions that form games, practices, powerful practices, and virtues, which we will now define.

Games: McClendon suggests a definition far more serious than, for instance, chess or football (I, 169). He points this out in a definition that he borrows from Bernard Suits, that a game involves four elements: goals, means, rules, and attitude (of the participants). He writes,

To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.²

It seems that for McClendon any meaningful basic activity humans do is, generally speaking, a “game,” governed by these elements.

² Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 34, quoted in McClendon, (I, 169–70).

Practices: In short, practices are complex or compound games with expanded conditions.

McClendon, in order to define “practice,” borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.³

Practices are what organize the social world of our action. They are governed by rules of grammar (which we will cover in another chapter).

Powerful Practices: McClendon goes further to mention that there are not only practices but “powerful practices.” Powerful practices are corrupt practices or redemptive practices that either enforce the “present evil age” (cf. Gal. 1:4) or work to overthrow them for the restoration of all things (I, 181). McClendon notes the correlation in Scripture between false gods and angels, to cosmic forces, to rulers, to their nations, institutions, and their representatives (I, 179–80).⁴ These forces are decidedly defeated by the practices of obedience to, for instance, the commands of the Torah and the way of the cross. The practice of doctrine and the practices of the baptist vision are for McClendon powerful practices that undo corrupt ones (II, 28).⁵

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 175, quoted in McClendon, I, 173.

⁴ McClendon here sees the demonic as located in the “powers and principalities” of political and institutional entities. Demonology, which he sees as too much influenced by medieval frameworks, has lost its function in the modern world (I, 168). While he seems correct in seeing the link between the political and the demonic in Scripture, this, perhaps, is an area of McClendon’s thinking that is too reductionistic and modern, shutting out the supernatural. He follows after thinkers such as Hendrik Berkhof, John Howard Yoder and Walter Wink on this account. See Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. J. H. Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald, 1984); J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Harmony, 1998). However, for a thinker that offers an account of the demonic in both the political and in the supernatural but is still wary of superstition, see Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ch. 8.

⁵ McClendon offers no list of all the “powerful practices” of the Christian community or the corrupt world. It would seem that all practices of Christianity are potential examples (this also true of all the characteristics of the baptist vision), but he specifically mentions certain ones like presence/evangelization (I, 175), friendship (I, 178), the Ten Commandments (II, 185–87), nonviolence (I, 198), community formation and discipleship (thus, preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, etc.: I, 221–22), forgiveness (I, 232), social-political stability, integrity, and liberty (I, 237), doctrinal reading (II, 28), etc.

Virtues: As we recall, virtues are “excellencies or skills enabling us to enjoy to the full or fulfill the elements of the embodied moral life—and to see vices as defects preventing or diminishing that enjoyment” (I, 114). Virtues are skills or practices that are distinctly moral in nature and can be used in conjunction with other practices to facilitate moral ends. McClendon gives the example of the practice of evangelism being enhanced by the virtue of practicing being present to others (I, 175).

These are all rendered in convictions, a concept we have already defined in our chapter on biography. Convictions, we might remember, unlike rational principles, are “tenacious beliefs,” such that if they were surrendered the person or community would be decisively different (BT, 34). Convictions are the intelligible aspect of games and practices. For instance, “Christ is Lord” is a conviction based on the gospel narrative that, in the context of all that this conviction implies, offers the rules and means to govern certain practices and virtues of the Christian life, implying total surrender in obedience to Christ.

McClendon gives examples of convictions such as getting married, incurring debt, declaring a duel, speaking a language, or offering a sacrifice. This strand reinterprets the bodily drives through social practices that judge them right or wrong, such that correct social practices can induce delight: “Delight is in the law of the Lord” (Ps. 1:2). Thus, convictions express themselves in regulative games, principles, practices, laws, etc. As a correlative of delight, justice and love are some of the social ideals sought in this strand, and it is achieved only by virtues narrated centrally through the sacrifice of the cross (CW2, 22). Now, we should note that this strand is not particularly or classically “metaphysical,” but, as we will see, this is ultimately directed by the anastatic dimension. However, McClendon is giving an account of the ordering of life. Just as action is important to life, so social practice is to ontology.

3. *Anastatic*: The third and final strand is the anastatic strand. McClendon sees this strand as the sphere that operates in the “name of the transcendent future” and is defined as the “revelatory, venturesome, morally creative strand” (CW2, 23). While all acts of God are initially anastatic, this ongoing, free act of God is what characterizes this strand. It was powerfully displayed in the Exodus events that liberated God’s people from slavery. It was in the prophetic authority that questioned the religious corruption of God’s people. It was in Christ’s authority to reapply the law in the Sermon on the Mount. However, it was ultimately expressed in the free act of God that raised Christ from the grave (vindicating Christ over bodily death and social condemnation). This free and surprising presence is in the church’s *koinonia* as the Spirit moves. Thus, we see the anastatic strand most connected to a Christian ontology as it reflects on the moral life from the standpoint of the resurrection.⁶

It is the anastatic dimension, constituted supremely in the resurrection, that constitutes these three strands as a “metaphysic” and not merely an ethical theory, as McClendon indicates:

Yet at whatever level one grips it, the resurrection demands and provides adventure: it demands adventurous metaphysic; it evokes venturesome theology; it invites a religion of hope for what is about to be but is not yet; it provides an ethic of novelty and heroism—much to lose, but to gain; it requires a politics of the unforeseen in human affairs—all these grounded in a God who is not confined to the past, but whose adventure joyfully opens toward our own. (CW2, 198)

Here it shows that the anastatic is ontological and therefore theological, religious, ethical, political, and certainly adventurous. It is this dimension that orients a new social practice and a new embodied life.⁷

⁶ For another ethicist that reflects on what McClendon calls the “anastatic” strand, see Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

⁷ Here McClendon offers a more integral account of the connection between morality and ontology in the anastatic than Wolfhart Pannenberg, who, nevertheless, offers an excellent account of an eschatologically oriented ontology. See Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 107.

How do these three strands work? McClendon gives several examples, one of which is particularly illustrative. In the sacrifice of Isaac, McClendon notes that while the biological need to protect one's own son failed (bodily strand) as the social drive to sacrifice his son out of religious duty prevailed (social strand), God's unexpected intervention demonstrates an anastatic revision, reorienting the other two strands (CW2, 24–25). Each subsequent strand is not necessarily superior to the others as they all meaningful and must come together in harmony for a holistic account of successful ethical life.

Of course, as we will see, this account of the ethical life is used to describe the actions of God, salvation, sin, etc., functioning more like an ontological analysis than mere ethical analysis. As we will show, these categories are correlative to narrative categories and allow for a metaphysic that is complementary to the biblical narrative.

4.4 The Nature of Narrative as the Foundation of an Ontology

McClendon offers his three strands or spheres based on the narrative of Scripture itself. It is a three-strand account involving a bodily, social, and anastatic strand. This, he argues, is derived from the biblical narrative itself, coinciding with the narrative structure of the biblical text, both generally and particularly.

What is a narrative, according to McClendon? At the end of *Ethics*, McClendon treats this problem and defines a narrative as having three basic elements: character, social setting, and incident (or plot). To illustrate how these elements come together to form basic stories, he writes:

It takes all three, but it takes no more than these three. “The king died, and then the queen died” has only incident and social setting; it reflects the mortuary table of a monarchy, but it is not yet a story. But “the king died, and then the queen died of *grief*” (I owe the illustration to Frank Kermode) is germinal narrative, susceptible of realistic enlargement,

because character, the delineation of a queen who is more than a statistic, has been added to the chronicle. (I, 329)⁸

So, we see a (loose) correspondence between the elements of the narrative and the three strands: bodily to character, social to setting, anastatic to incident. McClendon writes of the connection between the bodily strand and character:

My suggestion is that what literary critics refer to under the shorthand emblem of “character” is very close, close enough for our purposes, to what ethics must address in its first strand, the witness of embodied selfhood (Chapter Three). Ethics’ emphasis is a bit different from the critics’, they emphasizing the *self* that is embodied, we the *embodiment* of such a self; but their “character” is nothing without (real or fictive) embodiment, and our “body” is nothing without the actual self thus made incarnate. It is the self in its continuity that is “embodied”; and it is the continuities of selfhood that both ethicists (e.g., Hauerwas, 1981) and literary critics understand as “character.” (I, 329)

Next he equates the social setting of a narrative with the social strand of Christian ethics. He does not offer much explanation of this point, quickly moving to the third strand. Finally, McClendon connects the anastatic strand to the other device of plot. He writes,

And finally, in a world in which (as Christians are supposed to believe) all the circumstances of our lives are finally seen to be in the hand and under the eye of a providential God, the third element of realistic narrative, namely incident or circumstance, is adequately conceived only as God’s action upon us—even when that action be the ‘incident’ of a cruel cross (Acts 2:22) or an unanticipated resurrection (Acts 2:24). So the third or resurrection strand corresponds to what literary critics more neutrally call circumstance or incident. (I, 329)

Yet, McClendon notes some difficulty with this final equation, and we see some of our own.

McClendon writes,

There are some difficulties in this last identification. How can all circumstance be counted as God’s own action? Yet that we do face such a problem is evidence enough that in crucial cases we indeed identify circumstance, even cruel circumstance, with the

⁸ The above description is a bit perplexing as “the king died and then the queen died” would seem to have the opposite of McClendon’s description: character and incident, but very little social setting (which “of grief” seems to add by offering a condition to the character’s incidents). Perhaps he is implying that social setting animates the character from merely being a statistic.

decisive hand of God (cf. Gen. 45:8; Acts 2:23). As H. Richard Niebuhr so eloquently summarizes it, Christian ethics is just this: “God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.” (1963:126)

McClendon sees a problem if all incidents in the scriptural story are ascribed to God’s action. However, this is not an unresolvable observation, as McClendon thinks through standard questions of agency and providence in *Doctrine* (II, 169–89). Stated another way, a further conundrum with this correlation, albeit not an unsolvable one, is that while all acts of God correspond to the anastatic-incident in the narrative plot, God is also a character in the narrative who acts in bodily, social, and anastatic moments in the setting of creation (II, 285–87). Similarly, humans have bodies and are characters in a setting, but act upon bodies, societies, and natural settings, and towards anastatic realities. Thus, we must be mindful (which McClendon is) of how the three strands correspond not merely to the structure of narratives, but to the subjects and objects of action within those narratives also.

While McClendon borrows the working definition of a narrative from Frank Kermode, there are obviously other ways to define a narrative with other elements that are important. Seymour Chatman offers this definition, including the medium of a specific discourse: “A story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings) plus what may be called existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is the expression, the means by which the content is communicated.”⁹ Monika Fludernik notes several other elements. A narrative is different from a lyric or a ballet. Lyrics are linguistic but lack storied plots. Ballets have storied plots but do not (usually) have definite narrators. A narrative, for Fludernik, is a

⁹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19.

story with a narrator.¹⁰ Fludernik goes on to add the presence of a temporal and spatial world and characters. She then offers her full definition:

A narrative (Fr. *récit*; Ger. *Erzählung*) is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure).¹¹

So, we see several elements that can expand McClendon's initial definition, such as attentiveness to discourse, the presence of a narrator, or an expanded sense of social setting in a spatial and temporal world.

Elsewhere in *Doctrine*, McClendon seems aware of the limits of his earlier definition and offers two more elements: narrator and hearer (II, 40), and these general categories have unique qualities in the biblical narrative. McClendon writes,

if we think of the Bible as a single, great story, united by characters, setting, and plot (to be sure, that single story is a bundle of stories, and non-narrative material punctuates the text as well, but here we simplify), we may describe the church's Bible-reading task as the **identification** of its **characters** (major and minor), the **discovery** of its **plot** (and its subplots), and the **exploration** of its **setting** (through its many scenes). [...Also, there are] two vital but sometimes unspoken participants in the text—the **narrator** and the **hearers**. (II, 40, bold emphases are original to McClendon)

He notes that these general elements are given specificity in the biblical narrative:

Undertaking this complex task brings us, centrally, to the question about the identity of Jesus Christ and (through that) to the identities of God and God's people the Jews, and of Christians, and of the rest who people Scripture's pages. It brings us to the plot-line of salvation and the creation of this people. It brings us to the kingdom or rule of God as the overarching setting into which we enter if we enter this story. [...] The biblical narrator, the ultimate giver of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is God [...] And who are the hearers, the readers? It was said above that the church reads the Bible. (II, 40–41)

Thus we see a specific understanding of these general elements in the Bible. This "great story" is of God in Christ as the primary character with many minor characters set within all reality that

¹⁰ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.

¹¹ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 6.

spans creation to eschatology with the in-breaking kingdom of God. This story is narrated by the Spirit of Christ and heard primarily by believers in the community of God's people, both Jews and Christians (which we have discussed in the word, watch-care, and witness of the community). These form the various narrative and theological categories McClendon uses to offer his three-strand ethic, and we will explore them in more depth shortly. McClendon writes,

Consequently, the present volume's analysis of the shared moral life into three spheres or strands that are necessarily and indissolubly one is just matched by the literary critics' three necessarily interrelated strands or elements of realistic narrative. (I, 330)

To reiterate, here we see how these three strands function more like an ontology as they correspond to narrative components that represent the world. Now, one may ask thus: is it "real" just because it corresponds to the structures of a narrative? In the next section we will see that the narrative is the narrative of the acts of God. However, he will also find that the narrative, regardless of whether or not it is historical, offers real representations of God's character (this is a matter not connected necessarily with the three strands and will be treated in Chapter Nine). As we will see, McClendon holds to a basic historical reliability of the biblical narrative, but notes that there is a reality to the narrative, as the Spirit uses it to speak today, that exceeds what it meant in the past. This is precisely what we are emphasizing here: insofar as the narrative is used by the Spirit to speak today to all levels of reality (organic, social, and anastatic), it offers a real pattern for the church to follow. What we will see in the next section is that this account of life in three strands is given further content by theological and narrative categories.

4.5 Theological and Narrative Elements of the Three Strands

With these elements in mind, we will now see how these strands are narrated and filled out theologically. While the three strands offer an ethical theory, they also offer an ontology, categories that reveal the order of existence, derived from the biblical narrative. Thus, we see the

three strands acting in two ways: they are derived from the biblical narrative, but in turn, they offer structure and organization for its terms.

1. *Revelation*: The first and foremost schema of three strands is the action of God, which is organized into the three strands. Revelation is not an overall technical or religious category in Scripture. The term is a translation from a set of relatively unconnected words in Greek and Hebrew, indicating how anything is made known.¹² It is from the narrative presentation of God's action that the character of God is ascertained. Thus, McClendon merely states that God acts in organic, social, and anastatic ways, which in turn reveals his character as the Lord of nature, a social and relational God, and the God of dynamic surprise.

The attribute "goodness" is one that McClendon offers as a summary of how the three strands organize one attribute. McClendon does not place all of God's attributes into such a scheme, but using this scheme, it does illustrate an organizing structure. So, in regards to goodness, he writes,

In *splanchnic* [bodily] terms, God's goodness is a beauty perceived both indirectly (in the beauty of all that is) and directly (in the divine beauty inferred by or revealed to attentive beholders). In the *somatic* [social] strand, God's goodness is a fidelity of God's people whose meaning is best compared to the meaning of the covenant fidelity of God's people; God is the perfect "member" of his own community. In the *anastatic* strand, God's goodness is that which irrupts from beyond all human calculations—the resurrection of Christ. (CW2, 23)

Thus, we see here the categories of the three strands corresponding to moments in the biblical narrative that present an attribute of God, in this case his goodness. However, each strand has its own theological implications:

First, the *bodily* strand is understood as more than just people's bodies but rather as all nature, organic and inorganic. Nature is not opposed to grace; the two are merely an integrated

¹² For a treatment and interpretation of all the terms for revelation in the Bible, see Wolhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968).

whole under God's rule. Miracles occur in nature as events (such as water being turned into wine, or Lazarus being raised), which demonstrate that God is the ruler of all nature (II, 287).

Second, the *social* moment in divine action reveals God as a social actor, capable of communication and covenants. God is a social God characterized by unfailing love, by which God works to save others like a missionary, bringing about a new social order called the kingdom (II, 286). Salvation has highly social dimensions (which we will investigate further in looking at the narrative tool, "catachresis") where the believer is not merely a passive recipient, but an active participant in union and even friendship with God.

Furthermore, McClendon's understanding of characters in the biblical narrative implies a free-will metaphysic, where God is relationally open. The social dimension of Scripture speaks of a relational God, where there is a dynamism that exists because of the interplay between God, who reveals himself in history, and humans, who are both free and responsible (II, 168). McClendon even points out that God freely synergizes with creatures (Rom. 8:28, cf. II, 169), suffering alongside them,¹³ to produce a better future. As God is able to act in all levels of reality, as we saw, so are humans, to each other and to God.

While McClendon has shown the necessity of a narrative metaphysic (answering Vanhoozer's criticism in part), a narrative approach to God and ontology offers the conundrum of how a character (such as God) can be rendered in a temporal, dynamic narrative as a relational and responsive being, yet nevertheless a perfectly free (anastatically-oriented) being. McClendon suggests the following: First, while God is open and responsive, God's character must be reliable (there is something that does not change about God). Second, a God that reveals himself in

¹³ Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 57: Fiddes points out that the notion of divine suffering has actually been a common trend in Baptist theology, perhaps due to the resolutely biblically focused approach to theology. He lists the following: James Hinton, *The Mystery of Pain* (London: H. R. Allenson, 1866); H. Wheeler Robinson, *Suffering Human and Divine* (London: SCM Press, 1940); and Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

creation necessitates the notion that God's being has a changing dynamism, as rendered in narrative and relationship. God is a God of reciprocity, mutuality, and co-operation, bringing about a future through loving relationships in the present. Third, this change entails suffering for the world out of love for it: "To love is to suffer" (II, 171). Fourth, to allow for a free world, this entails a surrender of the all-sufficiency of God, moving from the "solitary hoarding of free existence" to active involvement (II, 171). McClendon does not have a full account of persons and agency, nor a full explanation of what this openness of God looks like, but this narrative display of character necessitates that God is dynamic without being reduced to creation, and that humans are free characters acting in the story of God.

Thus, third, the anastatic moment is God's surprising, pioneering action in history. This is evidenced in the surprising ways he is faithful to his promises, liberating his people. It is seen in the apocalyptic mode of biblical thought. It is supremely embodied in the resurrection. It permeates the reflections of Paul. More basic to our question of metaphysics, however, it is also closest to God's self-identification in Ex. 3:14. God is the "I am that I am,"¹⁴ which McClendon sees not as an identification of God with timeless Being, but rather as God's freedom to be beyond the pre-existing order: "I will be what I will be." McClendon paraphrases: "I will always be ahead of you. Find me as you follow the journey" (II, 285). This is a direct challenge to metaphysics grounded in impassibility (or at least some forms of it) that freezes God in static existence. As McClendon states, "In a sinless world, God would still be the God of change, still be the God of adventure, and transformation and adventure would be God's typical gifts still" (II, 286). This inherent dynamism portrayed in the narrative should not be a scandal to faith, since change need not be seen as an imperfection. McClendon embraces the narrative movements of

¹⁴ Grenz builds a full scriptural ontology around the divine name that would supplement McClendon's thoughts. Stanley Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

God's identity as God's freedom to be good in all the unfathomable, surprising, and uncontainable ways his anastatic being reveals.¹⁵

Thus, in seeing three spheres or moments of divine action, we see theological categories demonstrating an ontology where the biblical narrative is lived today. Also, we see that God's character is identified in these three levels of action. Because God acts in history at all three levels, which in turn is rendered in narrative, God is a real character in the biblical plot.

2. *Three Strands in Christ*: It is paramount to understand that Christ is the central organizing subject of these strands. McClendon writes,

I select three features centrally present in the historic person Jesus and amplified in the movement as disclosed in the New Testament: (a) the appearance of eschatological transformation—the centrality of the resurrection; (b) the formation of a Way of life that, by its own nature, confronts a cross—a shaping of community in this mode; (c) the renewal of organic life in connection with these events—the role of nature in primitive Christianity. (CW2, 195)

Thus, Christ embodies redemption in all these strands: In the resurrection (which McClendon treats first), the anastatic dimension is established insofar as “primitive Christianity knows that the future *is no longer* like the past” (CW2, 197). Because there is a resurrection, the Christian community experiences the anastatic on a day-to-day basis, awaiting the ultimate renewal of all things. Because God is a social God (the second strand), “he is not a timeless God but a timely God. For us God *is* history; this is epitomized in the Incarnate One, but it is present wherever God is seen as the Companion of Israel” (CW2, 199). God as *ahavah* and *chesed* is supremely shown in Christ (CW2, 200). The social strand and the anastatic are bound to the bodily as (citing Barth) covenant is the internal basis of creation; or, as McClendon's mentor, Walter Conner, said, “creation is laid out on redemption lines” (CW2, 199). So, finally, the bodily strand

¹⁵ The classic statement of openness by its key proponents is Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

shows God in Christ to be the God of nature, the land, and body, “earth in its earthiness” (CW2, 200): “In whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is Creator of nature and Lord over nature, bringing about a new nature, but it is only in Christ that these two terms are synonymous. Thus, these strands are given full ontological weight through Christ.

3. *Personal Characters*: McClendon notes that the three strands help us understand the persons of the Trinity in how they are personal, social, and even anastatic. McClendon repudiates any simple equation of each member of the Trinity with each sphere, affirming the Augustinian grammar that “the works of the triune God toward what is outside God are indivisible” (CW2, 204). God is One. “Yet,” McClendon writes, “when it involves not works *ad extra*, but God’s own nature, we must follow the ancient trinitarians in attending to the distinctions in order not to suppress actual complexity in God” (CW2, 204). Thus, he tries to resolve this by noting that each sphere reveals personhood differently:

Now what if we address the question, Is God a person?, to the concept of the God of Jesus Christ that our inquiry here has yielded? But *not* the question itself seems partly misplaced. As God appears in the communal or somatic strand, he is indeed a divine person: Judge, Lawgiver, Kinsman-Redeemer, Friend. Inasmuch as we have to do with God in social ways, God is God for us by making those ways his own. The incarnation is only the clearest fulfillment of a theme that appears throughout the biblical narratives. But insofar as there are other categories of our life under God, namely our participation in the natural order or our existence under a destiny not of our own construction—insofar as God is Creator and Destiny as well as Master—to ask, Is God a person?, is to *extend that social concept beyond the strand in which it appears, thus fallaciously denying the categorical integrity of the other strands of Christian experience*. (CW2, 204–5)

To extrapolate, this might mean (McClendon does not elaborate, and moves through his points quickly) that organic or natural imagery does reveal God in similar ways to personal and social images. God is spoken of as a rock, river, wind, fire, etc. The biblical writers were unafraid of likening God to these. However, also, God is no created being, so at some point the language of person must be used cautiously. McClendon does cite Arianism in that a strict

monotheism (the Father as the single person of God) actually prevented the richness of biblical revelation. Arianism held to categories that could not make sense of all the ways the Bible presents God. If God is one *and* three, he simply is unlike any human person.

Another example is the inability for theologians to recognize the “disparity between the god their hands have made (cf. Isa. 44) and the God of Jesus Christ.” As McClendon cites William R. Jones’ book, *Is God a White Racist?*, he notes that it would seem that God cannot both be the God of history and the God of the liberation of the oppressed, namely black people (for Jones). Jones offers his own proposal, which McClendon sees as unsatisfactory. It seems that for Jones, according to McClendon, God must be more than the God presented in the past:

If the One with whom Jews and Christians have to do is not *merely* a God of history as Jones and his opponents the Black theologians suppose, or for that matter *merely* the Ground of transformation, or *merely* the Wisdom of the given inorganic and organic world—but all of this and yet One—then the theodicy Jones demands cannot be forthcoming in the way he demands, but the God he spurns is *not* that One. Yet, there may be another theodicy based on another theology, another God. (CW2, 206)

Who is this other God? While what McClendon has said here is cryptic, he ends the essay focusing on how the strands come together in Christ (this “configuring” in Christ will be further explored in Chapter Six). Looking to Pascal, who stated how he favored the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the god of the philosophers (cf. CW2, 189), McClendon similarly looks to Jesus Christ:

But the historic point of departure would not be the gospel of the wealth of Christian Europe, with its armies, its empires, its religion, its successes. Rather, he [Pascal] appealed to this fact: Consider that despised, rejected, strangely surviving people; consider the Jews. Thus he took a clue from history, which disclosed not its gross movement or success stories, but its deeper meaning. That meaning, fully penetrated, leads back to the God of Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham. It makes sense, not of all history (for much of history is inimical to this Story), but of a history the world cannot grasp while it remains merely the world. For to grasp this history is to be grasped by that complex One who also laid hold of Pascal on his great night. (CW2, 206)

What this seems to mean is that Jesus Christ has the capacity to correct past and problematic conceptions of God, which is consistent with his identity of the living God of the Old Testament, the “I am who I am” or “I will be what I will be” (II, 285). Of course, Jesus Christ is a person, but this speaks of a God beyond “god” where mere personal language may not suffice. Perhaps McClendon is referring to how the anastatic revelations of God can de-actualize and de-personalize problematic pictures of God, including ones with biblical backing. This sounds almost apophatic, although McClendon does not use the mystical traditions. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, but John declares, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). Thus, for example, typologically the genocidal depiction of God in Joshua is fulfilled in Jesus (the “new Joshua”), who conquers the enemies of God (i.e. the dark powers) with the nonviolent cross (II, 235). Christ fulfilled the history of Israel’s God, but also simultaneously advanced it. While McClendon is vague at this point, we will deal more with the language of person in the next chapter, and how Christ configures doctrines in Chapter Six.

4. *Salvation*: Salvation has aspects for McClendon that correspond to the three strands. There are images of salvation that correspond to the bodily strand indicating presence: being “in” Christ, sanctification, bodily perfection (II, 113–16). There are images that correspond to the social strand indicating right relations: trust/faith, justification, as well as forgiveness, reconciliation, and adoption (II, 109–13). Finally, there are images that correspond to the anastatic strand indicating new life: way, liberation, etc. (II, 117–21). These images will be discussed in Chapter Seven. While some of these images only loosely (and not exclusively) correspond to their respective strands, this scheme does help us to understand how the many

images for salvation are relate to the acts of the believer. In other words, the images for salvation offer particularity to the three strands and the three strands organize the images for salvation.

5. *Sin*: Just as salvation corresponds to these narrative categories and strands, so also does sin. However, we should note that there are many terms for what theologians generally term “sin.”¹⁶ Thus, McClendon organizes the doctrine of sin into the three strands. In the organic strand, sin is reversion, rejection, mismanagement, and corruption of the natural moral capacities living systems have by nature of who they are (II, 134). Sin in the social strand is rupture in the fabric of society, caused by such things as broken family bonds, economic injustice, wars, inauthentic religion, etc. (II, 132).¹⁷ Sin at the anastatic level is the blatant refusal of God’s new world and new way (131).

6. *Baptists as Anastatic-Oriented*: While we will discuss this further in our chapter on catachresis and its section on salvation (Chapter Seven), here we will point out that McClendon argues that baptists have a unique soteriology that is oriented toward the anastatic. While Protestant theology (which McClendon sees as distinct from baptist theology) orients itself to a theology of right relations (the social) and Catholic theology orients itself to sacramental presence (which is more immediate and therefore bodily), baptists have emphasized the newness of life, an anastatic dimension that is embodied today (II, 109). The accuracy of this typology we will address shortly.

¹⁶ For a book by book treatment of what sin is and how it is dealt with in the Old Testament, see Mark Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009). For a treatment on all mentioned sins in the Bible, see William F. May, *A Catalogue of Sins* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967). Similar to McClendon’s emphasis on the ideal for each strand being delight, love and justice, as well as resurrection, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., offers a “breviary” of sin, focusing on its relationship to the breakdown of *shalom* in *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

¹⁷ Two scholars that have explicitly worked through the social dimension of sin are Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall into Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995) and Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

For McClendon, the anastatic in soteriology also did an important function to call into question problematic forms. McClendon saw baptists as oriented to the anastatic, which we will discuss further shortly. Apart of this is looking to the creative transformation of past forms to keep a tradition alive. McClendon states in discussing his pattern of discipleship,

A historic pattern emerges: transformation evokes a new language and calls forth new practices; these are required both to prepare the ground for transformation and to conserve it when it does occur. With the passage of time, however, the patterns of language and practice no longer signify and even inhibit transformation. Hence, the gospel is said to be a new law, the second blessing turns into a pro forma tradition, and speaking in tongues becomes a ritual practice. (CW2, 253)

So, for instance, justification by faith can serve as a powerful invigorator as it did in the reformation, or, as it did by the time of the Anabaptists, it can also enable moral laxity. Anabaptist emphasis on “new life” can devolve into legalism. The same way any soteriological schema. Thus, baptist constantly seek new leading from the Spirit as to how past forms can inhibit total obedience to the Spirit’s leading. This shows the creative anastatic direction in baptist thinking that, when done discerningly, calls into question laxity and invigorates new life in faithfulness to Christ.

We should note that McClendon also discusses three practices of baptist communities (preaching, baptism, and communion) vis-à-vis the three strands, explicating how one practice is understood in light of that strand and how doing so can resolve certain issues in its performance. However, since, for instance, baptism enacts something at the level of all three strands, it seems that McClendon offers these discussions for pedagogical purposes and therefore these three practices are not elaborated in full here.

Concerns: While this discussion quickly moves through the different expression of the three-strand account McClendon gives, one is particularly relevant to the baptist vision. As we said, McClendon argues that baptists are anastatically oriented where Roman Catholics and

Protestants are oriented towards either (sacramental) presence or a theology of right relations, respectively. This notion has some problems.

Since the anastatic dimension re-orientes the other two dimensions (although is certainly not independent or superior to the others), one cannot help but see this as an implicit statement of the superiority of baptist soteriology over Protestant doctrine and Catholic sacramentalism (which creates its own problems in how McClendon understands a generous catholicity, a topic we will take up later).

Moreover, as McClendon has offered a baptist account of the communal ethic of the church as way, watch-care, and witness, we must ask not only why Protestant theology and Catholicism are portrayed as neglecting the anastatic sphere (as only immature and extreme examples of these traditions would be accurately described in this critique) but also why baptist soteriology resides in the anastatic? While Anabaptists do have a soteriology distinct from Protestant theology, the typological correspondence is a loose one. Even McClendon admits that this is an oversimplification, and at worst, a caricature.

Nevertheless, without offering an implicit statement of superiority, baptists do have a theological tendency in their own way (other traditions do so under different grammar) that is anastatic. As we have noted, baptists also have a drive towards innovation and constant reformulation, which could be a claim to being uniquely anastatically oriented without necessarily claiming superiority over other traditions (after all, not all the attempts at revision have been good ones). Similarly, baptists often in their tradition have an overt awareness of theological fallibility, the capacity for doctrine to uphold the status quo rather than transform it. Undoubtedly, baptists are often self-descriptively Spirit-led, more likely to innovate doctrines and practices, and they possess a slightly different emphasis in their soteriology that warrants the

description of “anastatic”; however, McClendon could be more careful in his comparisons to other traditions.

What this section attempts is to show that the three-strand account can be further applied to other theological topics in order to give them clarity and structure. As with much of McClendon’s theology, his work is exploratory and innovative, but often incomplete.

4.6 Conclusion

While we will take up further questions of reality and reference in a later chapter, here we discuss the metaphysical weight of the narrative theology of McClendon. While some theologians have objected to narrative accounts of theology as undermining their ontological status, McClendon offers a biblically derived scheme of three strands. While this theory was intended and proposed as a theory of ethics, McClendon being a pragmatist of sorts, this account offers ontological premises by which Scripture is lived in the believing community. These three strands correspond to narrative categories as well as to theological themes, implying a narrative and theological ontology that we have explored in depth. There are certainly further applications to be made and supplements to fill out this account, but nevertheless, McClendon’s scheme remains a helpful way to understand existence, now and then, redeemed and unredeemed, and in a way that corresponds to the narrative of Scripture.

Chapter 5: Storied Systematics

I heard an old, old story,
How a Savior came from glory,
How He gave His life on Calvary
To save a wretch like me;
I heard about His groaning,
Of His precious blood's atoning,
Then I repented of my sins
And won the victory.
- Eugene Bartlett¹

Thus far we have looked at the baptist vision as a biographical emphasis on the lived dimension of doctrine, an attempt to construct a unified baptist tradition, a typological practice in community, an ontology of the narrative, and an account of the orientation of baptist towards the anastatic. Now, we come to the next stage in understanding how *this* (the biblical narrative) is *that* (our life today in relationship with Christ). We have come now to treating narrative doctrines. Our last chapter explored the framework; this chapter explores the content. This chapter will discuss the central issues in narrative doctrine: how one knows Christ through narrative; two-narrative Christology; and, finally, a narrative account of the doctrine of the Trinity. In these we see McClendon as a true constructive theologian, not necessarily successful in all that he works through, but nevertheless offering honest and profitable work. In doing so, we will see how Christ and the reality of the Triune God is known to the church in the way the baptist vision calls for.

First, we will ask, how is Christ known today? Here we will explore McClendon's narrative way of understanding Christ. Second, we will get into the specific contents of McClendon's Christology. This involves understanding a narrative methodology in contrast to other approaches that McClendon sees as unsuccessful. From there, McClendon's two-narrative

¹ "Victory in Jesus," 1939. Hymnary.org, accessed September 28, 2015, http://www.hymnary.org/text/i_heard_an_old_old_story.

Christology will be explained. Third, we will explore in brief McClendon's narrative doctrine of the Trinity, which, as we will see, could come to a fuller realism, a concern that we voiced about narrative approaches last chapter.

5.1 Knowing Christ through Narrative

We must take a step back and ask this: How do we know Christ at all? Is it by history or tradition, naïve faith or critical inquiry? While there have been prominent approaches “from above” and “from below,” McClendon offers a middle-ground, narrative approach, which demonstrates how Christ is known to the church through the baptismal vision.

First, we should define the two dominant approaches “from above” and “from below.” McClendon uses C. Norman Kraus' definitions, where first, he defines “from below” as an approach that begins “with the account of a concrete historical person,” which as we will see does not take into account the faith premises of the Gospel writer or historical inquirer, nor does it take into account the narrative crafting of the Gospels. Meanwhile, “from above” is an approach that takes for granted the traditional assumptions about Christ's identity from the third- and fourth-century creeds as simply being there in the Gospel narrative.² As we will see, McClendon sees himself as offering a mediating position: from below without historicism, from above without traditionalism (II, 240). Both approaches he evaluates with three questions (which form a grammar of concerns for all Christologies): (1) What right has Jesus to be absolute Lord? (II, 194). (2) How can monotheists tell the Jesus story? (3) How Christ-like must disciples' lives be?

² C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Waterloo: Herald, 1987), 44–54. Kraus offers an excellent discussion on modes of thinking through Christ's identity. This includes mythological, metaphysical, historical, existential, and revelation-based modes.

1. *From Above*: The two models “from above” are the Logos model and the two-natures model. According to McClendon, the Logos model was worked out in the context of both a pervasive missionary movement (as Christianity spread to non-Jewish cultures) as well as the debates with Gnostics and Ebionites. It was able, more so than its competitors, to understand the unity of God and Christ as well as that of Christ and humanity, overcoming both Ebionism’s denial of divinity and Gnosticism’s dualism. It also functioned well to show Jesus intelligibly to non-Jews. This was done through emphasizing Christ as the *logos*. God was inaccessible, but could be apprehended through his *logos*, which was a familiar concept to Greek philosophy (II, 252). The only problem with such a move is that it tied the concept of the Son as *logos* to an identity subordinate to the Father as God inaccessible (II, 253). Further explanation was needed.

A two-natures model developed in response to Arius at Nicaea (325 A.D.). The Church sided with Athanasius and articulated that Christ was *homoousios* (the “same-substance”) with the Father. It also affirmed the full humanity of Christ, but as McClendon worries, with very little definition as to what that meant. Christ had the right of lordship by his substantial unity with the Father (question three), but how the eternal Christ was related to the Jesus of the Gospel narrative (question two) became a concern to be worked through afterwards. Given the imperial display of power to resolve questions of orthodoxy, McClendon worries also that the question of Christ-like character (question one) was not really upheld by Nicaea (II, 254).

Certain experimental Christologies were proposed after this, thinking through the two-natures model of Christ decided at Nicaea. The Cappadocian Fathers are of particularly high value to McClendon:

these invented new distinctions and offered new clarification of the recently established Nicene orthodoxy. The Cappadocians insisted on the full human nature of Christ, and proposed that the permeation of Jesus’ human nature with the divine was merely potential from the time of his conception and birth, and complete only after the ascension—a hint

toward progressive incarnation. Thus these Caesarean pastors sought (far more than Alexandrians such as Cyril) to keep hold of the real life story of Jesus amid the winds of theological speculation. (II, 254)

Cyril then rose to counter the theology of two persons in Christ, divine and human, that Nestorius asserted. Cyril offered a defense of a union of two natures in one person. He defended the full humanity of Christ, but McClendon sees the affirmation of humanity as still far too vague, resolving many of the problems by sheer paradox (II, 255).³

In regards to the three questions, the two-natures Christology, for McClendon

affirmed a transcendent ground for the Lordship of Christ (our question one), his full deity, yet despite formal affirmations of his human nature, the Christ thus affirmed seems remote indeed from the humble Savior of the four Gospels—a remoteness borne out in Byzantine art with its *Christos Pantokrator*, a Christ fit to rule empires, but hardly recalling the way of the cross. Chalcedon's concern with rational coherence (question two) is genuine enough, but it must nevertheless be asked whether the severe paradoxes of the Chalcedonian Definition did not violate even ancient rationality.... Finally, the Definition seemed indifferent to the concern of Monophysites (and that of Nestorians) for the Jesus story as a viable model of conduct for disciples—touching our question three. In this regard, the churches and particularly the early monastic movement were sometimes more Christian than the theology represented in the creeds. (II, 256)

To summarize this discussion: in McClendon's view, the two-natures model, while in intention good (seeking to keep the unity of Christ's divinity and humanity), actually had some problems. It awkwardly required Christ to be of humanity's flesh, but seemed to inadequately define

³ See Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995). McClendon is a bit harsh on Cyril, who takes great pains to uphold that Christ is human in all the ways humans are (69). God was pleased to dwell even in the human weakness of Christ's humanity (cf. 107, 110). Still, the many paradoxes of the two-natures model set up in Cyril make issues where there need not be any. Thus, Cyril asserts that Christ suffered in his humanity, not his divinity (cf. 115—perhaps neglecting the many passages of the Old Testament where God passionately suffers). This is particularly in tension with his notion of complete union where “we must not think that he who descended into the limitation of manhood for our sake lost his inherent radiance and that transcendence that comes from his nature. He had his divine fullness even in the emptiness of our condition, and he enjoyed highest eminence in humility” (123). Cyril seems to oscillate from understanding two different natures mutually and distinctively in Christ (where problematically, for instance, divine impassibility and perfection *cannot* be in the human suffering, except by sheer paradox) to seeing one nature *through* the other, namely divinity through the character displayed in the humanity (whether presence in inherent weakness or virtuous action such as suffering and death). The latter is the approach McClendon takes.

Christ's humanity, namely how his divinity was at one with his bodily limitations—whether his childhood growth, limitation of knowledge of the future, or, more importantly still, his death (II, 255–57, 262). Divinity seemed, even in the best-intentioned portrayal, to swallow up Christ's humanity. Often the two natures were upheld by sheer paradox, leaving the question of unity remaining. Also, this model seemed (generally speaking) to focus the attention on the nature of Jesus over the teachings and example of Jesus.

2. *From Below*: The second approach is the historical approach, Christology “from below.” For McClendon, while the two-natures approach had trouble with the humanity of Christ, the historical approach had problems maintaining the divinity (II, 257). Notable proponents of this view would be individuals like Reimarus, who doubted whether Jesus really came to start a church as well as whether the resurrection was historical. Others were Schleiermacher, who saw Christ's religion as a feeling of absolute dependence; Hegel, whose Christianity was the metaphysical goal of the Absolute Idea; David Friedrich Strauss, who saw the Gospels as myth; Ritschl, who saw Jesus as a teacher of spiritual axioms; Harnack, who saw Jesus' apocalyptic preaching as a product of his Jewish culture; and, finally, Schweitzer, who saw Jesus of Nazareth's failed *parousia* as making him of no religious value for the present time (II, 258–59). These scholars struggled with relating the historic Jesus of Nazareth to their own day: either Christ was irrelevant, or absorbed into some interpretative framework foreign to the identity presented in the Gospels. Another problem arose as Jesus of Nazareth was increasingly seen as mythic. This view is well argued by Strauss, Rudolf Bultmann, and John Hick.⁴ For McClendon, the historical approach produced two fundamental tensions: (1) if Jesus of Nazareth was historical, then he is not divine, and thus irrelevant for today; (2) if he is a product of

⁴ See their principal works in David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, 2 vols., trans. Marian Evans (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1860); Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1958); and John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1977).

narrative crafting (apprehended through the subjective faith of his disciples and their narrative categories), he is not historical and therefore not incarnate (II, 261).

Thus, the narrative crafting and the faith-driven premises of the Gospel narrative are often a subjective obstacle to overcome, if not a scandal to be embarrassed at.⁵ McClendon writes later,

Historical critics tell us that the Gospels as we have them are *Ostergeschichte*; all are written in resurrection light. So far, criticism is correct. But authorities *on* these very Gospels may be tricked by their task into leaving Jesus in the past. If they do so, they may pray, not to a risen and present Lord, but only to a ‘God’ remote from the historically troubling question of who this risen One really is. (II, 466)

Thus, as we will see in the narrative model, McClendon is conscious of the fact that the presence of the risen Christ was important to the Apostles, who interpreted Jesus’ life, as it is for those that seek to know Christ today in the church.

McClendon answers his three original questions, saying that (3) while often Christ showed some ethical teachings for today and other applicable aspects, the identity of Christ as (1) lord over history faded, as well as how he was (2) one with God. Nevertheless, the historical model did purge the two-natures view of its implicit and ironic Docetism (II, 262). McClendon writes in assessment of the historical approach, “Because of the sort of historicism on which it depends..., it is in fact now desirable to find a successor to the historical model” (II, 262).

McClendon calls for a new model, but in many ways is still working in continuity with the past. The two-narrative approach, as we will see, is a way of preserving the fundamental insights and concerns of the historical model (with its concern for textual scrutiny and historical

⁵ Kraus (*Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 54) asserts, quite helpfully, that history is “multi-dimensional”: “The experience of Jesus as ‘the Christ, the Son of God,’ was not a merely private, subjective vision. His sonship was experienced as a public event to which historical witness could be given. Such an event is a multidimensional experience involving both empirical and nonempirical elements of consciousness and meaning. And these nonempirical dimensions are an essential part of historical being.”

actuality) as well as the two-natures model (that Jesus is divine and human). While the “Christ of faith” is very much one with the historical Jesus, the modernistic historicism of this model is foreign to the mode of retelling that history that the Gospel writers employed. A thicker, less reductionist description is called for.

3. *From Narrative Presence to Person*: For McClendon, Christ is encountered through his presence, which is offered and identified through the biblical narrative of Christ, forming a “this is that” dynamic between Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ, the presence of the risen Christ and the interpretations of the Gospel writers, and the presence of Christ in the church today with the Gospel narratives.

First, the resurrection connects and reinterprets the identity of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the definitive point of identification for Christ as the Son of God. McClendon writes of the meaning of the resurrection,

this was an act of God in time, reversing history’s judgment as represented by the authorities, by the opponents, even by the hapless friends of Jesus. All these read history’s judgment to be: death to this one. The resurrection opposed that judgment by entering God’s own judgment: life, Life to this same one. God reversed all human judgment by identifying the life of Jesus of Nazareth afresh with God’s own life, so that from that time, and in accordance with an eternal purpose of God, the history of this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was to be counted identical with God’s inner history, in such a way that in the knowing of Jesus Christ God could be truly known.... [Jesus is] the unique sharer of God’s identity: for us, by the resurrection, the whole story of Jesus is God’s own story. (II, 247–48, originally all in italics)

What this means is none other than what is said in Romans 1:4, that Jesus was “proclaimed the Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead.” “The resurrection is therefore the actual vindication of Jesus as the Christ; it is as well the formal vindication of God as the Lord of history, and it is the prospective vindication of the world through faith in the crucified and resurrected One” (II, 249).

Second, the resurrection presence led the Gospel writers to interpret their memories of Jesus in the light of the identity that now confronted them in the Spirit. Thus, to historically investigate the narrative in order to get around their faith premises is methodologically foreign to the narrative. McClendon offers three points: (1) The Apostles were confronted by bodily resurrection appearances of Jesus that they understood to reveal that Jesus was actually God himself. (2) The resurrection appearances disclosed a new future order that reoriented their thinking and action: the resurrection is something they could live. And (3), this glorified form was identical with Jesus of Nazareth, allowing for a new perspective on the man they walked beside and studied under, who uttered sayings they only now understood (II, 245). This process, led by the Spirit, as McClendon later comments, led to the reinterpretation of Jesus with the images of their Scriptures, and in doing so, titles and types were applied by catachresis (a notion we will work through in Chapter Seven). Jesus' identity, by his words and the interpretations of the Apostles, fused with notions of the messiah, Son of man, Son of God, Savior, Word, etc. (II, 273–76). These were expanded (not imposed) from Jesus' identifying statements and work.⁶ This means the historical Jesus is inseparably identified through the Christ the Apostles portrayed. Thus, the resurrection presence was identified as the divine presence of the human Jesus, as well as a glorious future coming into the present that the disciples were called to participate in.

Third, this presence confronts believers today in the church as they walk with Christ, offering knowledge of Jesus. Because the risen Christ that is encountered in the preaching of the gospel is identified with Jesus of Nazareth, who died on the cross and bodily rose, his story is our story (II, 250). Thus, earlier McClendon writes,

⁶ Richard B. Hays develops this notion in his book *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014). For instance, when Christ stills the storm in Mark 4:35–41, that Gospel that is thought to have a “low” Christology, but Hays points out that Mark has narrated the other characters' and Christ's actions to show Christ as divine, acting like YHWH in Psalm 107. Christ's identity and the figures of the Old Testament become one through the Gospel narrative.

A striking feature of the Gospels is that just as they tie the identity of Jesus (the one in their story) to the identity of the risen Christ (the one known in their readers' experience), they also invite contemporary readers to identify themselves with the wayward but transformed disciples of the story. (II, 228)

Thus, following Bonhoeffer, McClendon sees the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of believers as the point of access and impetus for inquiring into the identity of the historic Christ (II, 239).⁷ Christ is not typically learned about first as a historical object of antiquarian interest, but as the Christ that is present in the “work, worship and witness” of the church being the church (II, 240). This presence is understood by the Gospel narrative (II, 241). This presence is heard in the practice of listening to the Word (II, 241–42). Practice, presence, word, and person are integral.

Knowledge of the historical resurrection is inseparable from the life-transforming assumption that the resurrection is possible and real. Thus, the life of faith does have real importance for knowledge of the historical Christ. Because Christ is personal and his presence is promised in his church, Christ is known not in an impersonal, objective manner, but only by following him. Obedience in community is the only proper, Christian epistemology for truly knowing Christ: “knowing is a social, not a solitary accomplishment” (II, 244).

McClendon sees as flawed both historical models that either seek to dismiss historicity or to offer an objective apologetic. What must first be affirmed is that the resurrection is the basis of the possibility of knowledge of the resurrection. While one encounters Christ through his presence today, it is not the case that “if presence, therefore the resurrection is true,” but rather that “if resurrection is true, therefore his presence is also true.” Thus, while some have argued that there was no bodily resurrection (that is, that it was a mythic fabrication), that there was only

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. E. H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 43.

a spiritual presence that prompted the writing of a resurrection account,⁸ McClendon sees the bodily resurrection as the precondition for this spiritual presence the believer experiences (II, 245).

Contra the historical model, McClendon sees the resurrection appearances as the foundation, conceivable only by faith premises (for nothing other than Christian faith sees the resurrection of the crucified as possible). The historical model would seek to argue the historicity of the resurrection by evidence such as the empty tomb. Generally, it would see the necessity of faith as a barrier. To see these as proofs for the resurrection in order to have faith in it, however, would be to engage in the fallacy of affirming the consequent (II, 246).⁹

Yet, inquiring about Christ because of the presence of the risen Christ is not an uncritical exercise, bound to traditional formulations one encounters growing up. The presence is the impetus for critical and curious inquiry: “So Jesus Christ is alive: Otherwise we cannot know him. Our personal acquaintance, this strange corporate friendship, does not by itself tell us what happened on the first Lord’s day, but it does make the question of what happened then a live issue for the teaching church” (II, 244). McClendon offers pointed criticism of the excessive theological inferences theologians have made about the virgin birth (which we will cover shortly). Thus, for McClendon it is only through faith, through seeking to follow Christ, that the best and well-informed critical scrutiny of the identity of Jesus can occur.

⁸ An example of this would be John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 242–60.

⁹ This is perhaps inaccurate as to what historical arguments for the resurrection attempt to do. For instance, Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that these premises (such as resurrection appearances, as well as the empty tomb) suggest that resurrection is the best explanation (superior to the “subjective-vision hypothesis” as he calls it) once atheistic prejudices are exposed. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis Wilkins and Duane Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 89, 105. However, also see Pannenberg, “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation,” in *Revelation as History*, ed. Pannenberg (New York: MacMillan, 1968), 136–37. Nevertheless, what Pannenberg is guilty of in his zealous, apologetic motive is that he forces a hard realism over and against faith premises, such that the resurrection becomes relegated to an event like any other. Pannenberg is dismissive that his claim that the resurrection is a historical report is also deeply embedded in faith premises. This is where McClendon is right to critique his historical model, for its modernistic rationalism and objectivism.

Concerns: While this approach is highly counter-intuitive to the modern mind and potentially a scandal to the traditional mind as well, it nevertheless seems coherent. It integrates the identity of Christ with the subjectivity of the Gospel writers and the natural way Christ is known and encountered in the church.¹⁰

It is an account of how the Gospels were written that is self-consciously historical, but not historicist, faithful but not necessarily uncritical or fideist. As we mentioned in the footnotes, this cannot discount judicious, historical scrutiny that can be used to uphold the reliability of the Gospel accounts. It has a high Christology, but prefers to arrive there critically through a close reading of the biblical narrative. The only grievance, we will see, is that McClendon often is such a consummate revisionist and ameliorist, that he words his doctrine in contradistinction to the tradition of the church when he need not do so.

A historian may still worry whether the presence-oriented emphasis clouds historical judgment (which is a concern we will treat in another chapter). The traditionalist may fret over whether such a critical approach is orthodox (which will be treated in the next section). However, McClendon's approach here offers a coherent and accurate account of how the present church is presented with the presence of Christ, connected to the events the Apostles and Evangelists interpreted, wrote about, and passed on.

McClendon thus offers a narrative approach to Christology that seems to uphold the best of what the historical and two-natures models intend. This approach, very much a part of the baptist vision of "this is that," is succinctly summarized at the end of *Doctrine*:

Enter now the baptist vision. It tells us that this is that, that the story then *is* the story now; that the *Jesus* Christ who then rose, truly rose and appeared to the disciples in the breaking of bread is present now and does appear to us in our kingdom work and our spiritual worship, in our witness—and in *this very word*. It tells us the Gospel

¹⁰ This is also the conclusion of Terrence Tilley, *The Disciples' Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 35–36.

resurrection narratives both witness to what happened then and stake a claim on what happens now. (II, 466)

5.2 Two-Narrative Christology

Now that we have explored how Christ is known in the church, we will move on to thinking about important aspects of Christ's identity in the Gospel narrative. McClendon does this by meditating through key moments in the narrative, ultimately to conclude that Christ has a two-narrative identity. These moments include the earliest Christological hymn (Phil. 2), which shows the body of the narrative, the virgin conception (not birth), the resurrection (the birth and resurrection being the bookends of the narrative), and finally, the typological application of scriptural images and titles. In these we see his two-narrative Christology emerge (which McClendon calls the *kenosis* and *plērōsis* (II, 275).

1. *The Body of the Narrative*: Philippians 2 offers one of the earliest reflections on the nature of Christ, and so McClendon meditates on it before moving onto other matters.¹¹ For McClendon, Philippians 2 is not about the pre-existent Christ or a heavenly descent, but rather Jesus' character, not his "state but his task" (II, 268). Jesus humbled himself in his Lordship to actions of servanthood.¹² This refocuses Christology for McClendon, insofar as Christ's identity is given through what he did. He was baptized. He overcame temptation. He comforted the poor and healed the sick. He challenged the corrupt powers. He portrayed himself as the messianic

¹¹ There are other Christological hymns, which Donald Guthrie goes through in *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 343–65.

¹² See Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor, 2015), 119. Freeman notes that McClendon seems to side with the view that Philippians is more about Christ's actions as the New Adam than as a heavenly, descended being. Freeman further notes that there is debate over the meaning of this passage and over the development of high Christology in the New Testament (whether high Christology was a late development or whether there was an early, high Christology). McClendon would seem to side with the former but he does not state this explicitly. Freeman cites the two major proponents of each view: James D. G. Dunn (Phil. 2 as New Adam; high Christology as later development) and N. T. Wright (Phil. 2 as incarnational-kenotic hymn; early high Christology). See Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 121; and Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 90–97.

king, priest and prophet. Finally, he died for others (II, 268–69). His was a life of perfect obedience, thus showing himself to be the “Son of Man” (Jesus’ most used self-description, II, 274). It is this basic narrative of a faithful and obedient life unto death that forms Jesus’ identity, an identity we are to take up in action, thus calling for the need for responsible interpretation.

2. *The Beginning of the Narrative*: With regard to how the virgin birth narrative identifies Christ, McClendon is wary of the theological excess erroneously projected into it (II, 270). McClendon notes, in agreement with Raymond Brown, that Matthew and Luke seem more interested in describing a “virginal conception” rather than, as later ecclesiastical vocabulary stated, “virgin birth,” much less an “immaculate conception.”¹³ This means three things: (1) Jesus is not divine *because* he was born of a virgin.

The Holy Spirit is not presented here as a Jupiter-like father deity who impregnates a human mother. Close attention to the language of the narratives rather suggests the Spirit as the human Jesus’ divine Mother, conceiving Jesus exactly when and as Mary conceives him. Humanly speaking, Mary conceives Jesus; divinely speaking, the Spirit does so. (II, 270)

(2) The virgin birth is not meant to be the cause of Christ’s deity or sinlessness. McClendon forcefully states that the virgin birth is the prophetic sign that God is with us (II, 270). (3) The virginal conception is not the “*touchstone of Christian orthodoxy* or a dogma to be believed on pain of damnation” (II, 270).¹⁴ It is instead the virginal conception is a “sign of faith for the faithful” signifying “the full presence of God in the full story of Jesus.”

¹³ See Raymond Brown, *The Virgin Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973).

¹⁴ It sounds like McClendon is defending his liberal brethren here. He seems to affirm that the virginal conception is historical, but does not see it as a point of division: “Regretfully, experience shows that such an understanding [summarized above] is limited to the few in the modern world. Except for these few, that world hears the birth stories only to discount them as myth, or legend, or sheer fabrication, or alternatively it convulsively embraces them for what they are not—clubs with which to cow unbelief or bludgeon half-belief into full submission. One can only deplore this misuse, and hope for a rising generation better suited to receive the true value of the story Christians recall at Christmas” (II, 270).

3. *The End of the Narrative*: McClendon notes the importance of the resurrection for the identity of Jesus. The resurrection confers new “status and destiny” (II, 271). We have already spoken of this in the previous section, but here, McClendon states, the resurrection “is nothing less than God’s *(re)identification of the entire earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, from conception to its last breath, with God’s own immortal life*” (II, 271).

McClendon clarifies this assertion by comparing patristic Christologies and liberal ones. McClendon favors the Cappadocian clarification that states that Christ had divinity permeating his humanity, *proportionate* to his humanity, completely glorified after the resurrection and ascension (II, 271), McClendon sees the insertion of metaphysical attributes (such as omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence) to be foreign to the Gospel narrative. Meanwhile, he does not take the route of the liberal theological approach, which builds Christology through first working through Jesus’ God-consciousness, which for McClendon is completely inadequate in understanding Jesus’ unique relationship to the Father as well as his cries of abandonment (II, 271). God-consciousness does not seem to be the methodological basis for Jesus’ divinity. Only Jesus’ full identity with God can make the best sense of the cross: “So Jesus’ *sense* of abandonment is indeed expressed in the cry, but the fullness of divine presence coheres with the fullness of sacrifice; the utter identification of God’s life with Jesus’ own in the death of Jesus means that God tastes human death at its godless worst; here two stories, human and divine, finally—converge” (II, 272). Here we see already the two-narratives already emerging, although we will name and explain them further.

McClendon goes further to clarify that the resurrection-oriented identity of Christ is not adoptionistic. It is a point of vindication, not reward (II, 272). As he states later, Jesus is

identified as the preexistent *logos* of God's wisdom (II, 289).¹⁵ This *logos* is not found in the *logos* of Greek philosophy, but rather, in Jesus' embodiment of God's Word.

4. *Images Reflected*: McClendon notes that it is through this process of reflecting on the resurrected Christ that the Apostles theologized Christ as the fulfillment of their Scriptures. This, as we have said, is not to say that they invented Christ as divine but rather that they expanded Christ's self-description, by demonstrating that he was Messiah, Son of man, Son of God, Savior, Word, etc. (II, 273–76).¹⁶ These titles and images were applied to Jesus through a process called catachresis, which we will delineate in Chapter Seven.

5. *Two-Narrative Christology*: Thus, fifth, as interpreting this identification of the man Jesus with God in the resurrection propels two identities, McClendon now prescribes his two-narrative Christology. This essentially has two grammatical aspects: the *kenosis* dynamic and *plerosis* dynamic.¹⁷

Kenosis is not speculation on what divine attributes were left behind after Christ incarnated. It is the story of God coming into the human story to redeem. It is that notion that in the human Christ we see God giving himself fully in character and redeeming action. Perhaps more importantly, God has identified his power with the weakness of the cross (II, 275).

¹⁵ Thomas Finger thinks McClendon denies the preexistence of Christ based on his comments with regard to Phil. 2. However, this is not accurate as McClendon later, as shown, does affirm Christ as the *logos*. Finger simply did not read closely enough here. See Finger, "James McClendon's Theology Reaches Completion: A Review Essay," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 76 no. 1 (2002): 126.

¹⁶ Where McClendon goes through these terms, barely defining them, Guthrie goes into them in full, in his *New Testament Theology*, 236–341.

¹⁷ There are noteworthy forerunners of a two-narrative Christology that McClendon acknowledges as his inspiration: P. T. Forsyth and Karl Barth. See Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent, 1909), Lectures 11–12; and Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1969), IV.1 § 59 & IV.2 § 64. McClendon's narrative Christology is brilliant in its own right, but is quite sparse in dealing with the two-narrative approach. Thus, his work necessarily references these larger works. Given his direct reference to Forsyth, it seems that McClendon is a type of kenotic Christological thinker, albeit one much less concerned about the metaphysical aspects. See also C. Stephen Evan, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006).

Plerosis is the second literary dynamic and it is the “divine fulfillment in human life, God’s self-fulfillment by way of human investment” (II, 275). *Plerosis* is the story of human participation (and failure) in the divine plan, seeking faithfulness and obedience. McClendon gives the examples of Adam and Eve, tempted to eat of the tree; Moses, saved from Pharaoh to lead his people; Joshua, called to lead the people into the promised land; and prophets called to challenge faithlessness at terrible cost. Finally, these stories of attempted faithfulness were fulfilled and completed for all people. McClendon writes,

a Jewish lass named Miriam who has a baby she is commanded to call Joshua-Jeshua-Jesus, Savior... Jesus, who against all odds, in what must have seemed the worst of times, lived a life of full faithfulness, fulfilled his mission and was fully rewarded by his heavenly Father. (II, 275)

It is absolutely imperative that Jesus’ humanity is fully portrayed here, as nothing less would demonstrate the full possibility of faithfulness for believers (II, 276).

Also, the two-narratives model resolves questions of attributes (for instance, how is Jesus omnipotent as he died, or omniscient when he does not know the future?) and re-positions the divinity and humanity of Jesus in his portrayed identity. This means not merely two points of view to the story (as Bruce Marshall and Michael Goldberg have asserted, II, 276) but rather two *identities*: “the action of Jesus is God’s action; what Jesus suffers, God suffers” (II, 276).

McClendon is willing to admit that this Christology is not trouble-free (II, 277). However, he goes on to evaluate this approach with his three questions: (1) How does this show Christ is Lord? McClendon answers: “from the story” (II, 277). The story is of Christ, obedient unto death by the powers, and Christ, prevailing against the powers in the resurrection. “This is the sense that in, with, and under this story one meets its Lord and our own” (II, 277). The only weakness, McClendon says, if it can be called that, is that it does not speak of an infant babe in full possession of God-like power. Rather the baby Jesus “possesses the promise of the life that

God will acknowledge, finally, as God's own. [...] [T]hat life lived in a truly human childhood can be of absolute value when it issues in such a story as this" (II, 277–78). (2) How does this show the unity of Jesus with God? This monotheistic problem for believers in Jesus seems clumsily answered by Greek philosophical categories. "Here *all* the advantages seem to lie with our model," (II, 278) writes McClendon. Here in Christ the question changes to "How can the ever-active God be rightly, and supremely, associated with one story among earth's many?" This is answered with the universal object of election: Christ died for all and Christians are called to serve all, showing this particular God to be the God of all people. "Election is justified only if it is the womb of servanthood" (II, 278). (3) How does this offer a pattern of Christ-like living to follow? This question also, McClendon feels, is better answered by a two-narrative model as "Absolute Lordship on Christ's part (question one) entails nothing less than perfect discipleship on our part" (II, 278). Jesus' life and lordship is the disciples' way. This points to the baptist vision as Christ's way becomes the way of the believer.

Beyond McClendon's own self-evaluation, several questions and concerns can be offered for this approach: (1) How is this better (or even different) from the other two models, particularly the two-nature model? (2) If it is different, is it sufficiently orthodox (a criticism that has indeed been leveled against McClendon's work)? Working through the first question will aid in understanding the second.

1. *Compatible with Two-Natures?* McClendon moves on from the "two-natures" model to a "two-narratives" model. How McClendon situates these two approaches in relation to each other is difficult to ascertain. McClendon does not see categories like person, being, nature, union, etc., or their employment, to be natural to the biblical narrative, and thus they are not

essential to biblical faith (II, 466), so where they were based on the cultural language of the day, they must be re-expressed. In giving his two-narrative Christology, he writes,

Two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it save as a monument of what has gone before. All honor to Athanasius and Basil and Leontius, but they did not write Scripture, and it is to Scripture that we must return in fashioning our convictions. (II, 276)

Yet, while McClendon seems to generally see problems with a two-natures approach, he obviously does uphold the humanity and divinity of Christ. He is appreciative of the Cappadocian Christology (which is a different type of two-natures model), and in fact, sees what he is doing as in continuity with their insights.¹⁸ In that regard, McClendon's narrative theology is like a post-historical, two-nature approach. This conundrum gets at the problem of the issue of the use of tradition in theology, which we will take up later.

However, it is our interpretation here that McClendon is seeing the task of revising doctrine to be a part of the task of being faithful to preserving the past. Categories that do not function today have to be rethought while the underlying concern is upheld. In order to uphold the two-natures approach, one must revise it. Thus, in many ways, one can interpret McClendon's two-narrative approach as an attempt to advance the two-natures, an attempt to be faithful to it by offering a narrative grammar to re-situate it.¹⁹ Christ, all of Jesus' story, still is divine and human (the core concern of this model), but the nature of Christ is revised to be more

¹⁸ Sarah Coakley offers an excellent analysis of Cyril, Nestorius, and Gregory of Nyssa, showing that all three are two-natures thinkers, but Cyril's is one of assumption of human into the divine, Nestorius' is one of conjunction of natures, and Gregory's is one of progressive transfusion. See Sarah Coakley, "Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, ed. C. Stephen Evan (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006): 246–64. Coakley's recommendation of Gregory moves beyond the present classic versus modern kenotic model divide.

¹⁹ This is similar to the interpretation of both McClendon's critics and colleagues, as Finger and Freeman both offer this interpretation. Thomas Finger, "James McClendon's Theology Reaches Completion: A Review Essay," 125: "McClendon, then, seems to be seeking the balance that Chalcedon intended." Cf. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 119: "It seems accurate, then, to describe McClendon's two-narratives Christology not so much as a corrective but as a reappropriation."

germane to what the text is showing. The gospels do not give a metaphysical theory of attributes so much as a set of typological images and narratives that form Christ's identity.

All the resources for understanding Christ as having two natures are still present within McClendon's writings. God is defined not as a set of metaphysical attributes such as timelessness, omnipotence and omnipresence, such that paradoxes have to be employed to understand the events of Jesus' life. Rather God is an anastatic God, as we delineated in the previous chapter, where God is the "I will be who I will be" (II, 285–86). If God's nature is the freedom of his being, then God is free to dwell completely in the humanity of Christ.²⁰

2. *Orthodox?* So, the second question is whether this is orthodox. In the sense that the two-narrative approach is in line with the creeds, McClendon is ambivalent. However, as a re-appropriation of the two-natures model, McClendon's two-narrative approach is consistent with the creeds. But one unnamed critic, cited by Jonathan R. Wilson, states that if the same category (narrative) is used to understand the unity and duality of the identity of Jesus, one is left not with "mystery or even paradox, but simply contradiction."²¹ Wilson explains that Chalcedon is "two X in one Y" where McClendon seems like "two X in one X." Wilson answers (looking to Julian Hartt's Christology) that in Christ there could be two narratives in one agent.²² Hartt's is one view where the Gospel can have two narratives simultaneously presented in its discourse, where the human Christ is understood to be God in his narrative identity by a single intentionality of action, not in metaphysical substance. Looking to Frank Matera and Richard Bauckham, Wilson also notes the possibility of two agents in one narrative.²³ Matera seeks to show that the actions

²⁰ This is the approach Jenson takes following Barth's understanding of the divine attributes. See Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), I:140.

²¹ The critic is cited anonymously in Jonathan R. Wilson, "Can Narrative Christology Be Orthodox?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8.4 (Oct. 2006): 371.

²² See Julian Hartt, *A Christian Critique of American Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

²³ See Frank Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

of Jesus in the Gospel narrative portray two agencies, divine and human, attributable respectively to Messiah and Son of God. Wilson sees Bauckham as supplementing Matera, claiming that Christ has two simultaneous agencies in one (narrative) identity. Some events in the narrative show two agencies in Christ's identity. What Jesus does, God does. Wilson thinks both accounts (two narratives in one agency, two agencies in one narrative) are acceptable.²⁴ McClendon seems to use both: "The action of Jesus is God's action.... Here the twoness of the story, however we care to name it (two stories, two points of view), converges completely, and we see a human story that God will without qualification acknowledge as his own (Rom. 1:1–4)" (II, 276). Worded this way, two-narrative Christology is perhaps the grammar by which a better two-nature Christology can be articulated.

Concerns: We see essentially two concerns in this area of Christology. The first is that McClendon's Christology, while original, is also quite thin. He has to cover quite a lot in a small space. Thus, as we noted, his narrative Christology could have been filled out by showing in greater depth how Barth and Forsyth influenced him. He also notes his appreciation for other Anabaptists such as John Howard Yoder²⁵ and C. Norman Kraus.²⁶ Again, both could further supplement his account.

The second concern is that McClendon offers an explanation of Christology that sees the two-narrative approach as purely a development beyond the past two-natures approach. Yet his appreciation of the Cappadocians says otherwise. Gregory of Nyssa, as we noted, offers a dynamic, two-natures approach that is very similar to a two-narrative approach. McClendon, in this regard, simply did not need to be so dismissive of church tradition.

²⁴ Wilson, "Can Narrative Christology Be Orthodox?," 381.

²⁵ John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002).

²⁶ See Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, esp. chs. 3–9.

Thus, in looking at moments in Christ's life, we see a narrative doctrine coming together, culminating in a two-narrative Christology. As we have interpreted it, this is a doctrine that pays close attention to the biblical text and how it came about, but also sets out to fulfill the doctrinal concerns of any high Christology for the church. While Christology proper could be its own trilogy, McClendon did not have the space to pursue it. McClendon demonstrates that at the very minimum, Christ's identity is found in nothing other than the biblical narrative itself, and the two-narrative Christology offers a paradigm of sorts by which future Christologies can be further organized.

5.3 The Trinitarian Code

McClendon was one of the first to address the problem of a lost, trinitarian theology in his Baptist context.²⁷ But readers of McClendon's theology will perhaps find his chapter on the triune identity of God confusing. McClendon does not treat the theology of God proper, or the Trinity, until after the doctrine of atonement and the identity of Christ. This is intentional:

I have been approaching the doctrine of God in the only way that as a Christian I can.... The God under discussion...is no remote Absolute abstract in the heavens, no First Principle posited by someone's philosophy, far less is God the Nobodaddy of popular culture, or the nonexistent *theos* of post-Enlightenment atheism. Rather, "God" here is God known in the story Christians call gospel. (II, 281)

In understanding that, McClendon offers his doctrine of the Trinity as three ways the narrative is encoded. We see his narrative Trinity being composed of an account of characters, which accounts for his reflections on the failure of philosophical categories and the search for better narrative categories. What McClendon calls for with regards to the Trinity, as we will see, is very much in line with the baptist vision: seeing the truth of the text alive in the reality of the community.

²⁷ See "Some Reflections on the Future of Trinitarianism," in CW1, 61–69.

1. *Characters*: McClendon begins offering his trinitarian statement in *Doctrine* by discussing each person: Christ, Spirit, and Father. With regards to Christ, McClendon notes that Christ is one with God by God's presence perfectly expressed in Christ, such that Christ is God (II, 288) while each remains a distinct person. Through this, Christ can be meaningfully identified as the eternal *logos*, but McClendon warns that the *logos* cannot be identified by anything other than the narrative of God's embodied wisdom in Jesus (II, 289): "Jesus is God's utterance" (II, 289).

In moving on to the Holy Spirit, McClendon warns that the Spirit, as with other members of the Trinity, is often reduced to a role (II, 290). This need not be the case, but one has to be aware of what the Spirit is in the Old Testament. The Spirit (Hebrew: *ruach*, and in Greek: *pneuma*) is the personified force of God's action, literally, "breath." The Spirit is the basis of all life and the empowering agent of God's people (II, 291). In the New Testament, the Spirit is still the force that empowers, for instance, Stephen to speak to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:55, cf. II, 291), but the Spirit is now directly identified as the Spirit of Christ. Here McClendon offers his specific pneumatology:

The New Testament, then, advances the understanding of the Spirit it receives from the Old. The Spirit never clearly becomes as it did in later Christian writings a "distinct divine person." ... What the New Testament does do, as its central narrative demands it should, is to broaden and deepen the biblical idea of *God* so that God's true role as Trailblazer and Co-conspirator and Divine *Dynamis* is conveyed. Our present business is to secure a base line in Scripture that will guide understanding. (II, 291)

Oddly, in this description, the Spirit is a personal force and agent of divine action, identified through Christ's (as well as the Father's) presence, but is not a "distinct divine person." What McClendon means, it seems, is that the Spirit is always the Spirit of the Father or the Spirit of Christ. As a question of interpretation, this (perhaps poorly worded) statement does not seem to

mean that McClendon denies the Spirit is the third member of the Trinity, but rather that the Spirit is a person through Christ and the Father, not distinct from them. Thus, McClendon affirms that the Spirit is a character in the divine drama (II, 321). In his 1966 essay, he writes, “neither this polar knowledge of God [of Father-Son], nor the experience of Jesus-Spirit duality, made it appropriate to regard ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ and ‘Spirit,’ as three individuals, three entities, or even three equal and strictly analogical hypostases” (CW1, 67). Rather, McClendon is cognizant that the Holy Spirit, as well as the rest of the mystery of the Trinity, is not a person in the modern sense of an autonomous individual. He is the unseen partner as, in the case of Stephen’s martyrdom, the Spirit is within him, pointing Stephen to Christ and the Father (II, 291). The Spirit takes on an immanence that entails a personhood different from the human Jesus (CW1, 66).

Lastly, the Father is, as McClendon notes, a common title for a god in the ancient world. However, YHWH is not like these. He is a Father as the adoptive and liberating Father of love. McClendon notes that the patriarchal claim of Pharaoh over Israel did not hold, as YHWH’s fatherly power overturned Pharaoh’s (II, 292). This, then, is a fatherhood of fidelity, not mere power. McClendon writes, quoting Robert Hamerton-Kelly, “So ‘father’ means freedom in two senses: freedom from human bondage, and the freedom for a loving relationship with God based on faith rather than fate.”²⁸ Moreover, this designation gets expanded in Christ as the Father is the one that hears his cries of dereliction and liberates Christ from death (II, 293). Sadly, McClendon notes, the notion that God is Father often becomes more like the notion of Father Zeus, a cold, authoritarian deity that is used to maintain the social status quo (II, 293).

²⁸ II, 292, quoting Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 100.

McClendon's short 1966 essay offers much that his later statement at the end of *Doctrine* does not. He notes that these three identities came to be the object of reflection in the life of the early church. First confronted with the fact that God was in Christ, there was the vocabulary of duality: God as Father-Son (CW1, 65). Yet, also there arose an awareness of a third identity after Pentecost, that God was also in the Spirit with the church (CW1, 66). McClendon speaks of three foci or centers that the church reflected on, "not...three experiences, three histories—but one history of redemption" (CW1, 66). Here, similar to his later work, he sees the Trinity more as a description of what God does, and not so much as what God is (CW1, 68). We will revisit this assertion later.

2. *The Failure of Philosophical Categories*: McClendon makes clear the need for greater interpretive frameworks to understand the divine identity, and so goes on to discuss several classical and later modern philosophical characterizations of the Trinity, showing their "contributions" as well as their "costs" (II, 294). He discusses the "Logos" stage, which McClendon calls "latent trinitarianism," the "two-natures" stage (called "patent trinitarianism"), the philosophical theism of Aquinas, and finally the American transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. We are not going to summarize these discussions here, except to say that the Logos stage showed a divine Triad, a still rough trinitarian doctrine, articulated often with help from Platonism. The full trinitarianism of, for instance, Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Augustine (354–430 A.D.) shows a high degree of maturity in McClendon's mind. Still, however, it used categories that, while commendable, caused their own problems. McClendon writes, "Was God the remote deity of Aristotle and the Neoplatonists? Or was God the God of Jesus and the prophets: dynamic, demanding, personal, immediate?" (II, 298). McClendon, while appreciative, has similar concerns about Aquinas.

Emerson's philosophy, however, provides the most cautionary test case. His philosophy is based on scriptural categories, but he eschews formal religion, Scripture, and tradition. This methodological incoherence leads to a subjectivism that McClendon sees as implicit in so many Unitarian and New Age churches. These churches are incapable of understanding why they know God, and characteristically, as Emerson did with slavery, end up lacking the conviction to stand against true forces of corruption of their day (II, 304–6).

In this regard, McClendon greets the age of secular atheism with some optimism.

More broadly, to what extent have the very God-concepts Christianity has transmitted from its many-valued past gestated and nursed the atheism of the present? If we can answer, we may begin to separate the silence of awe from the silence of atheism. I believe the “death of God” thinking of Nietzsche's nineteenth century and of so many in the twentieth implores the community of faith to purify and strengthen its awareness of God. (II, 309)

The age of atheism has functioned to remind the people of God of the failures of all philosophical categorization of God, returning people to the need to stand in awe before his transcendence and hear him reveal himself (II, 307). The God of the philosophers has been critiqued by atheists but, “Perhaps, however,” says McClendon, “what was needed was not so much reconstruction of a concept as recovery of a reality” (II, 312). Thus, the Trinity is less a speculative concept than a present reality experienced as the text witnesses in the way the baptist vision calls for.

3. *The Search for Narrative Categories*: In *Doctrine*, noting MacIntyre's argument that all philosophy works in a tradition, McClendon looks to the “revelation heritage” as such a tradition. This tradition he sees as beginning with Barth, who offered a theology apart from a philosophically borrowed base. McClendon sees these thinkers (Barth, Niebuhr, etc. as well as his own mentor, Walter Conner) as constituting a tradition of reflection on the biblical narrative,

searching for their own “philosophy” of sorts (II, 293). This tradition has now turned to thoughts on narrative in order to best do justice to revelation in Scripture. This trinitarian story, McClendon summarizes this way:

The Christian story in its primal form tells of a God who (unlike gods of human fabrication) is the very Ground of Adventure, the Weaver of society’s Web, the Holy Source of nature in its concreteness—the one and only God, who, when time began, began to be God for a world that in its orderly constitution finally came by his will and choice to include also—ourselves. We human beings, having our natural frame and basis, with our own (it seemed our own) penchant for community, and (it seemed) our own hankerings after adventure, found ourselves, before long, in trouble. Our very adventurousness led us astray; our drive to cohesion fostered monstrous imperial alternatives to the adventure and the sociality of the Way God had intended, while our continuity with nature became an excuse to despise ourselves and whatever was the cause of us. We sin. In his loving concern, God set among us, by every means infinite wisdom could propose, the foundations of a new human society; in his patience he sent messengers to recall the people of his Way to their way; in the first bright glimmers of opportunity he sent—himself, incognito, sans splendor and fanfare, the Maker amid the things made, the fundamental Web as if a single fiber, the Ground of Adventure risking everything in his adventure. His purpose – sheer love; his means—pure faith; his promise—unquenchable hope. In that love he lived a life of love; by that faith he died a faithful death; from that death he rose to fructify hope for the people of his Way, newly gathered, newly equipped. The rest of the story is still his—yet it can also be ours, yours. (II, 319, originally all in italics)

“This story,” McClendon writes, “depending as it does upon the language of Scripture and its tradition, drives us back to trinitarian expression of the doctrine” (II, 319).

McClendon deals with three objections to the trinitarian story. First, there is the question of unity and diversity in the three-yet-oneness of God’s triune identity. Second, there is the question of whether a trinitarian characterization is forcing Scripture into a foreign mold. Third, there is the question of whether the language of “Father” or “Son” is sexist in today’s world of gender equality (II, 319).

1. *Unity and Diversity in God*: As to the issue of unity in the diversity of God's being, McClendon responds to these objections by noting that the Latin characterization of persons as *personae* did not help the doctrine nor its attendant anthropology. An "individual substance with a rational nature" (as in Boethius), *persona* defined humans through a dualism where they were not embodied persons but dematerialized persons with bodies. This meant that God was now three disembodied *personae* (II, 320), three individuals, implying tritheism. McClendon does not find social trinitarianism helpful here. Each member of the Trinity cannot be a person in the modern sense of an autonomous individual (as McClendon's chief interlocutor, Leonard Hodgson, insisted). This makes for tritheism, while the oneness of God becomes a "mystery necessarily beyond our knowing" (II, 320). Instead, the Trinity must be thought through while keeping in mind Deut. 6:4, that God is One. The doctrine of the Trinity must *deepen* the oneness, not "fracture it." "God is neither **a** person nor **three** persons; the term 'person' is so debased that it no longer functions usefully for the Christian community, and should be abandoned" (II, 320; bold font is McClendon's).

2. *Trinity as Biblical Grammar*: The doctrine of the Trinity, while not found in Scripture explicitly as the second objection accuses, is nevertheless a means by which the story can be understood, preserving and protecting how it is encoded (II, 320–21). McClendon writes,

The trinitarian doctrine, understood as an encoding of the biblical narrative of God, identifies God provided it is recognized as just that—an encoding meant to return us to its source. To say that God is Father is to recall that God is the creative source of all things, the JHWH who chose Israel, the "Father in heaven" to whom Jesus prayed. To say that God is Son or Word is to be reminded of the faithfulness of God displayed in Jesus Christ risen; it is to recall the humility of his radical earthly life, the triumphant tragedy of the cross, the wonder of Easter and Pentecost. To say that God is Spirit is to remember that Easter and Pentecost are for us a beginning, not a termination of God's new action; it is to recall the prophetic gift witnessed in Scripture and the many gifts granted the new fellowship; it is to be reminded of a link binding God above us, God within us, and God beyond us in mission. (II, 321)

The doctrine of the Trinity is a grammar (a concept we will explore later) of how to speak well of the God found in Scripture. It is less concerned with “appropriate description” (which will fail due to the mystery of God, who is beyond concepts of persons) so much as “correct reference,” which preserves the mystery of God as present gift (but without pantheism), God as Other (without atheism), and God as a Word or figure linking the two (II, 322). The Trinity must always be defined Christocentrically as God as the Father of Jesus, God as Jesus, and God as the Spirit of Jesus (II, 323).

McClendon seeks to get back to the New Testament expression of the Trinity, which is less a doctrine concerned with the definitions of being and person and more the structure of the Church’s experience and their practice. Curtis Freeman describes it as “not so much a single doctrine, but rather is the very subject of theology in which all doctrines inhere.”²⁹

Thus, unsurprisingly, the final chapter of *Doctrine*, “An Essay on Authority,” speaks of authority having a trinitarian structure. McClendon patterns this after 2 Cor. 13:14, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” In this, writes McClendon, “The authorities that under God we know are the love of God *enjoyed*, the grace of Christ *written*, the fellowship of the Spirit *gathered*. These remain proximate, imperfect, and for the time being. We have in them no eternal authority” (II, 487). Thus, the language and experience we use to think and practice God are still fallible, while God, the reference of Christian language, is faithful.

3. *Male Language*: The trinitarian (male) language of Father, Son, and Spirit is also meant to “encode and protect” what was found in Scripture (II, 321). While McClendon has no problem with female metaphors alongside, these do not supplant what is found originally in

²⁹ Freeman, “Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists,” in I, xxix.

Scripture. Other formulas, such as “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier” become problematic as all the characters of the Trinity enact redemption (II, 321).

Concerns: We see here much to commend but also much that could be expanded and some still to be corrected. McClendon has been honest about the nature of the doctrine of the Trinity, seeing the term as something not explicitly in the Bible. Refocusing the Trinity as a grammar, drawing away from theologies of the Trinity that have not properly dealt with the biblical narrative, greatly helps protect the reference of God that it points to. However, McClendon could retrieve some of the resources and insights from classic interpreters to help his statement.

1. *The Beginning of the Revelation Heritage:* Our first critique of McClendon is that he believes that the revelation tradition begins with Barth. A more accurate description would see all genuine Christian thinkers as part of this heritage. While Augustine did have Platonic excesses, and Aquinas, Aristotelian ones, this does not mean they did not break through their cultural frameworks by reflecting on Scripture to offer enduring and biblically faithful statements (we will see that Augustine, for example, does have some applicable advice on the language of personhood). To reflect on the Bible completely without cultural philosophical frameworks is foreign to the means by which the Apostles interacted with their own cultures. The question is not whether one should use the philosophies of the culture, but rather, the question is how to do so appropriately. In employing catachresis, picture theory, speech-act theory, etc., McClendon does the same. If these categories are no longer useful, or if they smother the biblical narrative, then they ought not to be used; but in many cases, they still offer usable insights. McClendon, while more historically conscious of tradition than many other baptists, still could attend better to the rich resources of the past.

2. *Trinity and the Language of Person*: One of these enduring insights of the Church Fathers into the Trinity that McClendon neglects in his formal account is with regards to the language of person. While the language of person is a notion difficult to discern,³⁰ that it should be “abandoned entirely” is even more difficult. Augustine recognized the fallibility of such terminology but also the danger of abandoning it: “Yet when you ask, ‘three what?,’ human speech labors under great dearth of words. So we say three persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence.”³¹ In this regard, Augustine recognized the categories he used to be proximate in rendering God’s revelation. Language is always proximate—but possible. To use any other word than personhood (even for the mysterious Spirit) would seem to downplay what might be called the “everyday” personal nature of God’s trinitarian revelation.³²

It is tempting to call McClendon a “narrative modalist,” but perhaps what McClendon is saying is not ultimately denying the personhood of the Trinity. Rather, he is merely cautioning against callous employments of technical concepts that do not appear in Scripture. He does talk about the Trinity’s members relating to each other, thus not as mere modes (e.g., II, 288, 321).

³⁰ See for instance, Colin Gunton, ed., *Persons Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991); and David Brown, “Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 48–78. Gunton favors the Cappadocian theory of persons as answering modern anthropological questions. Meanwhile Brown asserts that each member of the Trinity seems to have distinct centers of consciousness, intentionality, and will. For a Baptist treatment, see Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 54–55. Grenz lays out the development of the Trinity in Scripture. While the resulting picture is implicit and rough, there is the person of the Father as God, the person of Christ as Lord and therefore God, and the personal presence of the Spirit, who the early Christian community found to be more than just a force or presence. The Holy Spirit has personhood of his own. The Spirit is characterized as a “he” not an “it” possessing intellect, will, and even emotion (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10; 12:11; Rom. 8:26–27).

³¹ Augustine, *On The Trinity*, Bk. V, Ch. 9, in *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), found at *New Advent*, ed. Kevin Knight, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm>.

³² For instance, Robert Jenson seeks to move beyond the problems of “person/being” and offers the language of “identities.” His critique and proscription is warranted and helpful, but “person” still should not be abandoned. See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, I:106. He goes on to say, similarly to McClendon, “Within the doctrine of the Trinity, it was an achievement of the Cappadocians to construe the relation of one nature and plural hypostases. But in Chalcedon’s Christology, it is the other way around: one hypostasis is said to have plural natures. Further creative thinking is obviously wanted, but Chalcedon’s text suggests none” (I, 133).

So, all he means is that Jesus of Nazareth was a person in an obviously different way than the Holy Spirit is a person now, who is an empowering force, relating as the Spirit of the Father and Christ (not as his own separate identity as an individual would) to all people. Imposing a uniform technical definition of a person can result in inaccuracies. Nevertheless, McClendon's vague statements of abandoning the language of personhood are confusing, if not disconcerting. While we saw that McClendon's three-strand account offered a metaphysic for narrative realism, here we might confess the opposite. A more successful narrative doctrine of the Trinity will see these persons and relationships rendered in the story in a more realistic manner.

3. *Trinity as Center for Theology*: More importantly, by taking a stronger notion of the Trinity, Grenz, like many other theologians, is able to reflect on the attributes of God, securing love as God's central, eternal characteristic.³³ The Trinity has been used by several theologians to think about different ethical applications such as community and equality. As in Miroslav Volf's estimate, because each member of the Trinity is equal, so also each member of the church should be.³⁴ Other theologians, such as Paul Fiddes, use the Trinity as the central motif to think about pastoral topics like suffering and forgiveness.³⁵ These are opportunities McClendon has missed. Here his narrative theology of the Trinity could have moved into further theological reflection, but appears stalled in these narrative remarks.

In conclusion, McClendon's narrative Trinity is odd, at once complex and simple. He does do well to resolve problems in understanding the language of the Trinity, but, as we have recommended, retrieving the trinitarian reflection of the past as still relevant would greatly help his task of reframing the identity of God. Nevertheless, the call for recovered reality of the

³³ Grenz offers this as the foundation for his ethic in *The Moral Quest* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), ch. 7 and 8.

³⁴ For example, Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), ch. 5 and 6.

³⁵ See Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: The Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

Trinity in community according to a biblical grammar is precisely the solution that the baptist vision implies.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at how Christ is known through narrative, how Christ's identity is presented in the Gospel narrative, and how the Trinity is presented in narrative as well. McClendon displays originality in his insights, working to resolve past problems honestly. However, a sustained critique across several of these sections of his work is that McClendon has not given church tradition its full due.

Chapter 6: Signs of the Times

“This living Word is internally witnessed to by the outer word if one pays close attention to it. It is like a sign on an inn which witnesses to the wine in the cellar. But the sign is not the wine.”

- Hans Denck¹

The past is alive in the present and the future bears down on the present, in the baptist vision. This entails a notion of narrative and time that McClendon works through in his understanding of “signs.” We have already explored several ways in which the biblical text speaks into the present in a “this is that” type fashion, but within McClendon’s work there are several ways that this occurs, depending on what aspect he is talking about. So, in this chapter we will delineate McClendon’s understanding of signs and their connection to baptism, communion, and preaching (what McClendon calls “the remembering signs”), as well as the time of creation and eschatology, and the configuration of certain doctrines.

To understand McClendon’s employment of signs and configuration, we will first look at his categorization of historic, providential, and remembering signs. From there we will delineate how baptism, communion, and preaching work as remembering signs. Finally, we will shift from signs to configuration, and we will look at how Christ as the “sign of signs” functions to configure doctrines. This configuration occurs in two ways: structuring history and time around a Christological center, as well as reorienting a doctrine or set of texts around a Christocentric criterion.

6.1 Historic, Providential, and Remembering Signs

In Chapter Four, we noted that the actions of God are grouped into three strands or dimensions: God can act at the bodily or organic, the social, and the anastatic levels. But the acts of God can also be understood as “signs” in the narrative. As we will see, there is significant

¹ Hans Denck, “Recantation,” *Anabaptism in Outline*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Waterloo: Herald, 1981), 143.

overlap, as the two schemas refer to two different ways the narrative is structured and how doctrine is organized around the narrative.

The discussion on signs is first introduced regarding the nature of miracle, which is a concept in disrepute in the modern age. McClendon points out that Hume rightly critiqued the prevailing view of miracles as the suspension of natural laws (II, 185). Rather, Scripture sees the acts of God as “signs” and “wonders” (II, 185, in Gk.: *semeion* and *teras*, respectively); and this does not imply, McClendon writes,

[the] irruption of God into a nature from which God is usually absent, but does reckon that God may act within nature (where he is already present) vividly to display the divine intention for nature.... Miracles, in short, are signs, divine actions within creation in which the present of God shines forth in power for (creative, and especially) redemptive ends. (II, 186)

Miracles do not so much break open the clockwork universe fashioned by a distant deity so much as they vividly display the actions of God, who is constantly relating to creation. McClendon refers to the biblical employment of these terms, offering his own basic definition. Signs “do something, to convey something” (II, 388). Signs are also “speech-acts” (which is a term we will explore with regards to baptism in Chapter Eight). However, we might define a sign from his usage as simply *any meaningful event that is interpreted as an action of God*. McClendon delineates the acts of God into three classes: historic signs, remembering signs, and providential signs.

1. *Historic Signs* are “pillars of the divine program for earth, waymarks set, like the cairn at the Jordan crossing, to show that God in his creative-redemptive journey passed this way” (II, 186). These historic signs include but are not limited to creation, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the Red Sea crossing, the wonders in the desert, the entry into the promised land, the birth of prophecy associated with Elijah and Elisha, the return from captivity, and ultimately in

the New Testament the signs of Jesus' life and ministry, his crucifixion and resurrection, as well as Pentecost (II, 186–87). They are actions of God in creation that speak “from faith to faith” (II, 186), meaning that they could have material explanations to what caused them, not having any “supernatural” component to them necessarily, and still be legitimate. For example, the slaying of Goliath and the return from exile do not have any supernatural elements per se, but both are interpreted as significant actions of God.

2. *Remembering Signs* “cluster around each historic sign” as subsidiary moments that are remembered and reenacted repetitively. These are signs that show the “divine presence and purpose that directly correspond to and recall the aim and force of one or more great historic signs” (II, 187). Sabbath, prophetic preaching, conversion-baptism, and the Lord's Supper² all reenact these signs in a “this is that” fashion. We will say more about this shortly.

3. *Providential Signs are smaller, local signs*. While all signs are providential, these signs are not necessarily of the grandeur of historic signs, nor do they form figures intended to be repeated like remembering signs do. However, they do carry power and meaning for those that witness them. McClendon gives the example of the shepherds being told that finding the baby in swaddling clothes will be “a sign for you” (Luke 2:12). More significant signs would be the sign of Pentecost with the giving of the Holy Spirit (II, 438). These providential signs occur today in the lives of believers; such seemingly common events can carry special significance that communicates something of God to the believer.

Thus, historic, remembering, and providential signs structure the experience of time and events for the people of God. They signify the great events of redemption, so that the remembering of them figures prominently within the practices of baptist community.

² For an treatment on the Lord's Supper as a remembering sign in McClendon's thought see, Scott Bullard, *Remembering the Body* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), ch. 2.

6.2 The Remembering Signs

McClendon does not see a fixed number of remembering signs (I, 111), but does mention the Sabbath, baptism, prophetic preaching, and the Lord's Table explicitly. While we will not offer a full exposition of all the remembering signs,¹ by taking a closer look at them, we see how these embody the historic signs and also offer the means to structure doctrine and practice in the baptist vision.

1. *Remembering signs enact the baptist vision.* Remembering signs fuse the believer to the community and the community to the biblical narrative, with all its historic signs (II, 382). For instance, with regards to baptism, McClendon writes, "This recapitulation of Jesus' exemplary baptism in our obedient baptism marks a convergence of narratives. The story of the baptized is of entry into a realm where the old has passed away, the new has come" (II, 387). As Edward Erwin explains, baptism (one of the remembering signs), biblical interpretation, and the believer's church (the distinctive of liberty) form an integral connection.² Thus, the remembering signs connect the reader to the biblical narrative.

2. *Also, the remembering signs are governed by the baptist vision.* McClendon was concerned with the apparent lack of resources in baptist liturgy (II, 385). However, he sets out to offer the baptist vision as an encouragement towards thoughtful and biblically sound liturgy. All baptist liturgy, where the remembering signs are enacted, attempts to fit the story of faith—past, present, and future—into its practices of worship in a "this is that" kind of fashion (II, 406).

3. *Therefore, preaching is the orienting remembering sign for the others.* The baptist vision orients worship and therefore places the proclamation of the Word at the center.

¹ And we should note that the most detailed sign, baptism, has been explicated well at length in Edward Hamilton Erwin, "Baptismal Ethics in a Baptist Ecclesiology: Developments and Departures from the Theology of James McClendon, Jr." (Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, 1992).

² Erwin, "Baptismal Ethics," 370.

McClendon cites Hippolytus' account of the early church in which the ministry of the Word preceded that of the table (II, 384). He does this to state that the Word always offers a potential corrective to problematic practices of the Lord's Table, baptism, and all other practices.

4. *Remembering signs are the human response to God's historic signs* (II, 383), which means two things. First is that these are "effectual signs" as God acts through them (II, 382). Second, however, the act of God is not without human accompaniment, as God acts through the deliberate reiteration of the historic signs, *in* the remembering signs. With regards to baptism, it is a triply enacted sign, as God, community, and the baptismal candidate all do something in the act: God forgives, the community commissions, the candidate commits (II, 389). Similarly, preaching, while it obviously has to be done by a person, cannot be done by everyone. A person has to live what he or she preaches. The power of preaching cannot apply *ex opere operato* as disregarding the character of the preacher would be dangerous (II, 400). The preacher acts under the authority of Christ, as a Christ-follower. Similarly, in communion, McClendon notes that the effectual sign within communion is performed as a reiteration of God's forgiveness ("shed blood for the forgiveness of sins"), God's solidarity ("this is my body"), with Christ showing true thanksgiving ("giving thanks, he broke it") and instructing the remembering sign as a remembrance but also as a means by which to anticipate his coming (II, 401). Thus, in order for the full reenactment of this remembering sign to happen, the community must be remembering these components as they eat. It is only then that a meal can actually be a story, linking it to the Exodus and the Crucifixion (II, 404).

5. *Remembering signs recreate and restructure time.* McClendon offers a grammar of worship, in which he mentions the grammatical aspect of time in the remembering signs. In discussing the Sabbath, McClendon notes that this remembering sign was not merely a repetition

nor, as Mircea Eliade described, an attempt merely to return to the past.³ The charge to remember and keep the Sabbath was effectually to create a better future, preventing Israelites from being reduced to their toil. Similarly, remembering signs are not attempts to return to the primordial past, but are forward-looking. They are ethical and educative in purpose and scope, and in the baptist vision, if they are not, they must be revised (II, 408). McClendon sees any remembering sign that is done in a way that attempts to escape the details of history, or done to the neglect of its ethical dimension, as closer to fundamentalist nostalgia or its naïve restorationism (II, 408). Figuration and the remembering signs are not the same as Eliade's myth of eternal return, in McClendon's estimate.

Thus, the remembering signs are a dimension of the baptist vision as they connect the community to the past, in order to point them to the future. Observing this, we will now deepen their application to show how they connect creation and eschatology to the present as well as configure doctrines typologically.

6.3 Time Configured

As we have stated in Chapter Three, the baptist vision is a typological practice of reading and living the Bible Christocentrically, in a "this is that" fashion, which means seeing any statement of Scripture through a figural logic. This implies that Christ is the center of what the Bible is about, hermeneutically speaking. However, since Christ is eternally present to the church, this implies a figurative *temporality*, not just a figurative hermeneutic. Here we will discuss how certain signs, whether of creation or the eschaton, inhere with a figural interpretation, structuring time in Christ. We see this specifically with regards to creation, where the sign configures creation, and eschatology, where figuration structures the signs of the end.

³ See Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

With regards to the biblical narrative, in so far as it is a narrative of God's signs, communicating redemption to his people, Christ is that "sign of signs" (II, 186), particularly his resurrection. McClendon writes,

In the resurrection, God owns his presence in all the history that reached its crest in Jesus of Nazareth; in the resurrection, our share in that history is affirmed as well; in it, the vector of creation toward its holy destiny is imprinted. Around this central sign, lesser signs gather—the empty tomb, the appearances to the disciples throughout the first Eastertide. Judgment may vary as to the authenticity and value of any one of these subsidiary signs, but if we see them as tributary to the Jonah-sign itself, the resurrection, we are free to estimate the contribution each makes without challenging the roof beam, Christ's resurrection from the dead, beneath which all reside. (II, 186)

The resurrection sign, coupled with the crucifixion and Pentecost (II, 188), then becomes a kind of master sign or control sign in which other signs are understood, configuring time and space.⁴

Christ is both the sign of creation and the eschaton, which enables a figural understanding of time.⁵

1. *Christ as Sign of Creation*: In discussing the doctrine of creation, McClendon argues that creation is something fully displayed in Christ, as the new creation. Creation is only full understood as such through Christ.

⁴ To use M. M. Bakhtin's term, McClendon is positing the fundamental "chronotope" or "time-space" of Scripture as a canonical unity: Christ as eternally present to the church, leading it forward. A chronotope refers to the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature." It is how a piece of literature presents the world, space, and time within itself, absorbing the reading into it. See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

⁵ A theology of time is developed elsewhere in, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994). Balthasar looks at Christ as the center of time and history. In regards to time, see Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (London: SCM, 1962). In regards to space, the reflections of literary critic Northrop Frye are very similar. He uses the categories of metaphor, myth, and typology, all of which interconnected in the biblical archetype of Christ. For instance, he looks at images of trees and water, bride and bridegroom, monsters, and kings, all culminating in the Gospel's imagery. See Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths*, ed. Robert Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), chs. 3–12. Also, images of paradise, fire, mountain ascent, and dark descent undergird the spatial dimension of the poetic imagination of the Western world; see Frye, *Words with Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1990), chs. 5–8.

This resolves two essential problems. First this means that creation is not an event lost in the mythic past, described only in mythological terms. Second, creation is also not something purely discoverable by science, either, for science cannot discern the meaning of the world vis-à-vis the Creator. Creation is open and ongoing, and should best be understood by its destiny. This destiny was displayed in the resurrection. Perfect creation was not an event that occurred six thousand years ago and very quickly was lost, but rather something that was displayed in the life of Christ and in the resurrection *par excellence*. McClendon writes, “In the signs, God’s people are pointed to creation’s point; in them, God’s salvific purpose is disclosed; in them the last end of all things appears. Taken together, the historic and remembering and providential signs do this work” (II, 188). Creation is signified not in the mythical past, but in the creation of a redeemed people, who will bring blessing to all creation (Gen. 12:1); in Christ, the new creation; perfectly signified in the resurrection, the power of which is displayed in the church’s midst; and finally completed when the New Heaven and New Earth appear (Rev. 21). Creation is in Christ. This is that, and so, creation is most clear as it is focused through the sign of Christ, especially his resurrection.

2. *Figural Interpretation and the Sign of the End Times*: “Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven,” says Matthew 24:30, in an often misunderstood, even cryptic passage. When did (or when will) this sign take place? This passage suggests that it will be within a generation (Matt. 24:34) but also completely beyond prediction (Matt. 24:36). Here a figural understanding of time, time understood in a “this is that” manner, helps to understand this sign.

Two problematic interpretations, which can all but ensure that this passage is misread, can be addressed here. First is that the historical context is often disregarded (perhaps as a perversion of the “this is that” dynamic) as to naïvely say that this current generation is the final

generation, disregarding the 2000 years in between. The second misreading is exemplified in liberals such as Albert Schweitzer, who thought the historic Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, who wrongly predicted the end of history within his time.⁶ Was the Bible mistaken about the second coming? Is there any truth to living as in the “final hour” now (1 John 2:18)? By offering a typological understanding of history and time, McClendon offers a solution to what some have called the “delay of the *parousia*.”

McClendon does so by positing a typological understanding of time in Mark 13, suggesting that the end is always sensed as “imminent” and time is “foreshortened” for the church as Christ is present to the church, calling it into Christ-like transformation not yet realized:

Be recognizing foreshortening, we give up a *misleading* sense of the future’s immediacy. By the prophetic vision, disciples learn to see the present under the form of the biblical past, so that their present “is” that past, but to see it also under the form of the prophetic future, so that the future “is” also coming *now*.... By this vision, disciples live by the faithfulness of the Christ who *was* and *is* and *is to come*. (II, 92)

McClendon sees this, in discussing Mark 13 (II, 94), as a “this is that” awareness, where the past, present, near future, and definitive end intersect in the author’s intention. Building on historical-critical exegetes like George Beasley-Murray, he notes that if Mark was writing after 60 A.D.⁷ about the end occurring in the generation following the crucifixion, the words were false even as

⁶ For instance, Jesus proclaims that the end had come (Mark 1:15, 9:1). In Matthew, Jesus states, “There are some standing here which shall not taste of death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28, cf. Luke 9:27), and elsewhere, “All these things shall come upon this generation” (Matt. 23:36). Paul continues this mentality when he states, “Brothers, the time is short” (1 Cor. 7:29). Similarly, Peter seems to see the present generation as the last: “[Christ] verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you” (1 Pet. 1:20), and “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Pet. 4:7). Even Revelation states, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. William Montgomery (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001). This is also traced out in James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 377–83.

⁷ See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 322–37. Similarly, this could be supplemented by the work of Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1992), 43. Witherington notes that the eschatological parables seem structurally designed to allow for the unexpectedness of the delay of the *parousia*.

they were penned: too much time had already gone by. If Mark was circulated after 70 A.D., its warning to Christians about the coming siege would be obsolete, and if this event was the final end, it would again have been incorrect. It seems then by the common sense conclusion of all the factors of the text that there is a complex, “this is that” dynamic at work within it. Mark was not worried about his statements being obsolete. Why is that? Beasley-Murray, whom McClendon cites, calls this the “trioptic awareness” that attempts to resolve the question of how to interpret this troublesome passage. The trioptic awareness is that the text of Mark reflects (1) what Jesus said (narrative present), (2) how it all would end (distant future), and (3) how that relates to Mark’s church concerns (reader’s present). Christ’s life, Mark’s present, and the final end all converge in one.

What makes this trioptic awareness possible? As McClendon explained, those that asserted the delay of the parousia missed the eschatological events because they failed to realize that Christ in his resurrection is the eschaton:

This figure was Jesus of Nazareth. He “lived and breathed eschatology; he *was* the eschaton; it was recognizing this, in the power of the resurrection, that made Christians Christian.” ... What John of Patmos recognized (and the historical Questers strained to grasp) was that by that resurrection Jesus of Nazareth not only was but is God’s historic Lamb, so that after Easter, history becomes by right his history, the harvest of the cross his ongoing story. His continuing, risen life is the matrix that holds eschatological doctrine together and requires that we place it at the very doorway of doctrine: his story goes on till time’s end. Jesus in biblical faith has not withdrawn to a timeless, Platonic eternity, leaving time as the realm where we must work things out on our own. He not only came, but is here and continues to come, and it is he, this same One, who is finally to come, he the First and the Last—he the center of the quiet history that links the two. (II, 100)

Because it is Christ who is the eschaton, there is always an imminent sense of the end in the life of the church, as believers look to Christ as the Lord of history, leading the church into the new age.

By understanding that this text is not merely intending to offer a straightforward description of Jesus' words or of distant future end-times, but rather a message crafted for the present of Mark's church, we begin to grasp this more complex notion of time, a notion of time that allows for the same sense of imminence in all ages of the church. We can understand that the signs that Jesus spoke regarding his crucifixion and resurrection as the end can get, as McClendon states, "reassigned" (II, 188), guiding the church to constantly be waiting on Christ. This means the signs given in Mark 13, Matt. 24, and Luke 17 still apply today. The signs of Christ's coming still apply as they point to Christ's in-breaking, kingdom presence that "reshapes time" (II, 66).

Thus, as history displays the historic signs of redemption, such as creation and the end yet to happen, these point to the "sign of signs" in Christ, and as the risen Christ is present to his church, calling the church forward into the future, the church experiences a configured dimension of time: time in Christ. These are mechanism vital to the baptist vision that sees the past in the present. The vision works not as a mere function of the text, but because Christ is present to the church. Further aspects of eschatological and creation language will be clarified in the next chapter.

6.4 Doctrines Configured

In this final section, we will look at how doctrines are configured Christocentrically. This very much expands and illustrates the typological practice described in Chapter Three as Christ and Christ-like living are hermeneutical criteria for effective reading of the text. Doctrines are not signs, but as we will see, doctrine is the substance of the remembering sign of prophetic preaching. We will show that bringing passages of Scripture and doctrine into a figural focus can

offer new signs of the good news of faith in Christ in our world. McClendon applies typological configurations to eschatology, sin, atonement, and the separation of church and state.

Prophetic preaching is a remembering sign. The substance of preaching is doctrine. Doctrine is a powerful practice involving, as we have seen in Chapter Three, typological interpretation where an interpretation is in turn interpreted through the figures of Christ's life and measured by its capacity to produce Christ-like character. "Primary theology" or doctrine (which McClendon understands as a powerful practice) gives preaching its center (I, 112). Therefore, bringing a doctrine together in figural reflection and interpretation is a part of the preaching remembering sign, showing Christ as the fulfillment of the Scriptures and the center of Christian life today. "The preached sermon is a sign from God; it is God witnessing" (I, 113). Not all theology is the powerful practice of doctrine and not all preaching is prophetic (II, 400), but there is a kind of preaching with a typological practice that is theologically refreshing to the church, a sign of his presence and truth. This we see in the following:

1. *Christ as the Center of History and Eschaton*: Here, in McClendon's discussion of eschatology and the meaning of history, we see a prudent first example of this typological structuring. "Christian eschatology is primarily for faith and for doctrine first of all because Jesus himself was and remains an eschatological figure" (II, 100), writes McClendon. This directly impacts the way eschatology effects ethics.

Refocusing the doctrine typologically on Christ's character reorients the doctrine for both liberals and conservatives. Critiquing some liberation theologians, McClendon points out that liberation cannot be the point of history for then there is too much temptation to procure it by "hook or crook" (II, 97). Rather, looking to a sermon by John Howard Yoder, McClendon asserts that Jesus must be seen as the center of history, first and foremost. Political liberation is a

product of Jesus's centrality. This reorients discussion of liberation to Christ's work of establishing a reconciled people in the church for the world (II, 99).

Similarly, while some fundamentalist preachers might manipulate the texts of Revelation to form their hellfire-and-brimstone sermons to get people into the church by guilt or even despair, McClendon reminds that hell must be preached through Christ's attitude.

Jesus' use of this term [i.e., Gehenna] was not to encourage speculation about further human exercises in eternity, but to warn about misconduct by God's own people now: "Except you repent..." And so it was with heaven: for his people it was a picture of consolation for the present burdens of discipleship. (II, 102, ellipsis McClendon's)⁸

Eschatological pictures (which we will treat in another chapter) are intended to nourish Christ-like character in the present and thus must be read through Christ's identity, not used to create a separate identity from the one offered in the Gospels.⁹ Understanding that the rhetorical purpose of eschatology is not to give Christians a blueprint to the future, ammunition for hellfire-and-brimstone sermons, or motivation for naïvely building a political utopia, the church can listen to these figures and be encouraged to continue living faithfully without fear, awaiting the final judgment and restoration of all things (Acts 3:21).

2. *Christ as the Measure of Sin*: McClendon attempts to resolve some of the problems of the doctrine of sin through typological reorganization of the doctrine (we have already looked at how sin can be understood by McClendon's three spheres: sin as anastatic refusal, social rupture, and organic reversion).

⁸ This is more fully developed into a theory called "conditional futurism" by which the warnings of punishment, while real, are meant to correct people towards possible universal salvation. See James Goetz, *Conditional Futurism* (Eugene: Resource, 2012). G. C. Berkouwer similarly offers a conditional view of eschatological warning, allowing for an explanation of the twofold rhetoric of eternal damnation and ultimate redemption. See Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 413: eschatological rhetoric is meant to "confront us with the admonition to open our eyes to the light and see the salvation, not to harden our hearts."

⁹ J. Denny Weaver offers a critique of the violence of God employed in some theologies that attempt to use pictures from the Old Testament and Revelation to gloss Christ's nonviolent identity in the Gospels—where, as Weaver argues, if the cross is the fullest revelation of divine action, it really should be the other way around. See Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

In McClendon's view, the doctrine of sin has two problems: First, the doctrine of original sin in its Augustinian and Reformed view determines that all people, before they were born are sinners. All people become guilty and depraved without ever acting, and thus, all deserving death and eternal punishment before even beginning to live (II, 125). This implies that God's fundamental posture towards humanity, even at its most innocent forms (i.e., infants), is one of vengeance. Moreover, infant baptism then rises not as an act of adult repentance and commission, but a step to necessarily cover the infant's inherited guilt. In John Calvin's version, for McClendon, this came to a particular form where salvation became subordinated to original guilt. "Thus, so far from seeing sin in salvific light, Calvin and his heirs saw salvation only through the lens of universal sin" (II, 126).

Thus, rightly, the Anabaptists strongly objected to original sin in these various implications. Conrad Grebel saw the fall as a typological pattern for those who know good from evil and choose evil; Hans Schlaffer failed to see any connection of original sin to the condemnation of children; Peter Riedeman carefully distinguished the inherited inclination to sin from the guilt that is only incurred after one chooses to sin (II, 128).

The second problem is that if one grants that Scripture teaches the doctrine of original sin (despite it being Augustinian in origin), it immediately becomes problematic in the knowledge of humanity's much older evolutionary age. McClendon cites Reinhold Niebuhr, who pointed out that the "fall was frankly a myth" albeit a myth that reveals the facts of human nature: "that man sins inevitably, yet without escaping responsibility for his sin" (II, 127). However, Niebuhr's modernism—his tendency to dismiss the usefulness of the Genesis narrative and move on to scientific categories—concerns McClendon.

McClendon then looks to the Social Gospelers, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, for illustrations of modern theologians who tried to restate the doctrine. McClendon focuses on how sin is learned and that humans are responsible for the sin they freely do:

Here, then, are the makings of a fresh doctrine of social sin and its entailed evils. It is a doctrine that denies we can be guilty of others' sins; nevertheless we can suffer their consequences. It frees us to employ psychology and sociology to analyze the human social condition while recognizing that these sciences are not untainted by those very conditions. It leaves myths of origins...to those who can make scientific use of them, while it listens for the word of God to disclose the pervasiveness and power of the "kingdom of evil" in practices and institutions. It has no need to "redeem" infants from sins they have not committed, but it will not be thwarted when it finds children drinking from poisoned social wells, for it proclaims a gospel that purges both the poisoned wells and the victims who drink. In all these ways it challenges the traditional doctrine. (II, 129)

From there, as we have already explored in a previous chapter, McClendon understands the doctrine of sin in terms of rejection of Christ's new way, social alienation, and finally degeneration of nature.

McClendon recommends bringing these insights together in a typological approach: "we approach all these narratives with Christian eyes, or at least with gospel-influenced reading strategies. So read, they are indeed types of the disobedience, human perversity, and false aims that were to oppose Jesus when he appeared" (II, 123). Thus, he concludes, it was the particular theology of Christ as the second Adam that actually brought to the fore the significance of the first. Christ then is the measure of human sin because he is the measure of what it means to be human:

This human being, Jesus in his authentic, undiminished humanity (Jesus as the human answer to God), declares in his action—in words and work, in life and death, in historic particularity and once for all—the true anthropology promised in creation. By this faithfulness he unveils sin: Sin is whatever falls short of, whatever denies, whatever misses the way of faithfulness to God's rule embodied in Jesus Christ (cf. John 3:19, etc.). (II, 124)

In doing so, this gives an answer to the problem of human origins and the nature of sin. Adam need not be understood as the historic point in which humanity became enslaved to physical death, inherited guilt, natural decay, etc., but rather, Adam is a pattern of unfaithfulness that all humans model, of each person's choice to choose the death of separation from the Author of Life. "The relation of believers to Adam [in Romans 5] is not said here to be one of sin inherited; it is rather the relation of a model (*typos*) of failure to those whose lives are governed not by it but by the "one man, Jesus Christ" who by his grace has become *our* type (v. 17)" (II, 126). The Pauline doctrine of Adam is not one of historic causation but figural emulation.

This prevents certain problems arising from a doctrine of original sin, e.g., that present created nature is the cause of sin, or that sin is an inevitability due to our human nature (II, 124). Yet if Christ is truly human, sharing our humanity without sin, our failure to follow him is not due to human nature but precisely the opposite: the inexplicable failure to act in accordance with true human nature (II, 124).

At this point, it should be noted that Joe Jones offers an expanded account of a Christocentric understanding of sin, which can supplement McClendon's thinking on this matter.¹⁰ (1) Similar to what he accomplishes in McClendon's view, Christ reveals how we have fallen short of harmony between God, others, and ourselves. (2) Christ shows the universality of forgiveness, and therefore our rejection of that grace. (3) Jesus brings to light the seriousness of God's judgment against sin. (4) Jesus reveals the full depth and range of sin, the vast potential for humans to get things wrong. (5) Jesus exposes the symptoms of sin, even ones that we are tempted to see as beneficial. (6) Jesus brings to light the danger of thinking about sin apart from the possibility of forgiveness from its despair. Finally, (7) Jesus helps us understand that sin is

¹⁰ Joe Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, 2 vols. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002): I, 348–52.

both a condition of human life and also a product of human acts. Thus, Jones is able to add to McClendon's insights, showing the danger of thinking about sin apart from how it is revealed through Christ.

In reorienting this doctrine towards a Christological center, certain pitfalls can be avoided, whether from the archeological and evolutionary discovery of humanity's much older age, or the problems of the doctrine of original sin itself. By focusing on Christ, the doctrine is stated in a way that focuses sin on believers' chosen relationship with Christ, their Christ-like treatment of others, and whether or not they are moving in their nature towards Christ's glorified body.

4. *Christ and Atonement*: As we will see in the chapter on catachresis, the doctrine of the atonement is one that is composed of a rich set of metaphors (legal, sacrificial, ransom, and military). In order to arrive at a final unified account of the doctrine of atonement (with all its mixed metaphors, II, 227), McClendon argues that it is not a theory that primes the doctrine but the narrative itself, and in doing so, he is able to apply the narrative beneficially to certain problems in biblical theology, notably the problem of violence.

In order to understand all the metaphors and "midrashim" (this is McClendon's way of interpreting the plurality of atonement doctrines; see II, 230), McClendon centers them on the narrative of Scripture and especially on the Gospels. "The Gospels make sense of the cross exactly by setting it within their own larger story" (II, 228). As McClendon notes, the people of God in the Old Testament experienced several expectations. One was their divine commission to bless all people. Another was their hope to be free from oppressive powers. Still another was their constant frustration due to their own disobedience, as declared by the prophets. The further

expectation of the people was for a violent revolutionary to bring about the kingdom of God (II, 234).

However, McClendon re-narrates the life and death of Jesus, focusing on its typological significance, which shows Christ's nonviolent obedience against the dark powers. Jesus came as the "new Joshua," which fulfilled these expectations in a surprising way.¹¹ McClendon writes,

the nonviolent warfare Jesus waged [established] once more on Joshua's own territory, Canaan's land, the new rule of God. From *Jordan*, where the second Joshua passed through the waters en route to conquest, to *Jericho*, whose wall of disbelief collapsed when blind Bartimaeus, authentic disciple, gained sight by faith, to *Jerusalem*, where the first Joshua never marched, the Prince of peace made his triumphant way. God's rule required justice of a sort beyond the rule of law...; God's reign promised sins sent away and human hurts healed; God's word pierced the injustices of military power (Rome) and religious power (Jerusalem); God's Servant and Son challenged the iniquity of dominating family structure and of ethnic pride; God's Wisdom and Power exorcised the demons that rage within hurt human souls; God's Messiah (but that was a secret) drew men and women into a new fellowship (the disciple church), ordained a new social order (love of enemies), evoked a new hope (the coming of the Truly Human One and the Age to Come). Joshua, the new Joshua, was marching on. (II, 235)

However, just as in past plans, the enemies of God plotted to thwart redemption. It seemed at first like they succeeded as Christ hung there crucified. Yet, it is here that Jesus was showing the deepest sense of how to realize the kingdom of God: with nonviolent obedience unto death. Jesus was showing his followers the way.¹² "Had they had their way, there would have been no cross; had he had his, there would have been thirteen. They declined the honor" (II, 235). So, McClendon writes, "He was executed with some other enemies of the powers that be—he alone on a cross where all were to have borne witness. Christ was in their place—by the baptist vision,

¹¹ This typology is expanded in Kenton Sparks, "Gospel as Conquest: Mosaic Typology in Matthew 28:16–20," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68.4 (Oct. 2006): 651–63.

¹² See Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1918), 240–79. While McClendon does not offer a purely moral-influence theory of the atonement, this dimension is present. Rauschenbusch offers perhaps the most beautiful and multifaceted account of the moral-influence view, mapping out how the way of the cross confronted bigotry, political power, injustice, mob thinking, militarism, and class contempt.

it was our place. He was buried then, one for all. God was dead.” Yet, McClendon notes that the unexpected happened in the resurrection. The cross was now understood through the resurrection. “The resurrection was God’s sign of self-identification with Jesus who had taken the nonviolent way of the cross. It was God’s way, God’s *only* way. Our story reveals the continuity of the church that came after with the story of Jesus’ earthly career.... God’s rule, by way of the cross, prevailed” (II, 236).

This shows the work of the cross in three dimensions, three dimensions that all atonement theologies have to resolve in order to be successful. First, the cross shows the defeat of the enslaving powers of the devil. Second, this shows the disposition of God towards sinners: “the Jesus story [is] exactly what God would do, exactly what God was satisfied to do, on earth [...] what Jesus does in our place is not merely what God requires but what God does, what God suffers” (II, 236–37). Finally, third, Jesus at the cross reveals a new vision of humanity. “Jesus acts to change human life, and he does change it” (II, 237). Within this grammar (a notion we will discuss later) all atonement theories reside.

By offering a typological and narrative base for the doctrine of the atonement, McClendon sees the cross through the expectations of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament through its embodiment in Christ. He is able to typologically show that Christ as the new Joshua does not require violence to bring about the kingdom of God, but rather does so by radical nonviolent obedience.

5. *Christ and the Separation of Church and State*: Finally, McClendon looks at the life of Roger Williams and sees a consistent typological reflection that led him to reject state authority in matters of religion (II, 482). Because Christ was king, free-church believers did not want the state to impose religious conviction on anyone. They did not feel compelled to build a theocracy.

All such notions of the kingdom and law of the Old Testament were fulfilled in Christ. Instead, because Christ was king over any government, people were called to believe as their conscience led, seeking to be responsible to what Christ has showed them. Thus, we see a figural reading offering one of the historical baptist convictions.

Here we have seen several examples of how McClendon uses typological reading to restructure and refocus doctrines, which effectively expands and illustrates the typological practice described in Chapter Three. This typological hermeneutic is made possible because of the sign that Christ is always present, speaking to the church through his Word. Eschatology, sin, atonement, and the separation of church and state can, each in its own way, be better concentrated through a resolutely Christocentric logic given to it through figural reading.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at McClendon's understanding of signs in the biblical narrative, which in turn structures life in the baptist vision. The historic signs orient the remembering signs, and it shows how Christ is the center of creation, history, and eschatology. Also, through the practice of the remembering sign of prophetic preaching and a Christocentric figural practice, we have shown that Christ addresses the church through doctrine, orienting the teaching of the church towards Christ-like action.

Chapter 7: Text as Metaphor, Catachresis, and Picture-Thinking

Some men by feigning words as dark as mine,
Make truth to spangle, and its rays to shine.
“But they want solidness.” Speak man thy mind,
“They downed the weak; metaphors make us blind.”
Solidity, indeed becomes the pen
Of him that writeth things divine to men:
But must I needs want solidness, because
By metaphors I speak; was not God’s laws,
His Gospel-laws, in olden time held forth
By types, shadows, and metaphors?...
By birds and herds, and by the blood of lambs
God speaketh to him: and happy is he
That finds the light, and grace that in them be.
- John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*¹

James McClendon, Jr., had a profound love of literature. This love is evident throughout his work. It is in the care he brought to writing every biography so that it was as unique as the life he recounted. It is in the poetry quotations that pepper his sermons. It is in his analysis of love fables in *Ethics*. It is in his inclusion of a chapter on literary and artistic witness in his third volume, culminating in his grand appreciation for Herman Melville. It is found in his more natural writing style. McClendon’s *Systematic Theology* does not read like a systematic theology—in a very good way! McClendon agonized over every word and sentence, making sure it had flow and that it did not just resemble the same dry, wooden writing people have come to expect from the category of “theology.” More importantly for this research project, McClendon employed this literary concern in his reading of the biblical text and construction of doctrines. Understanding these literary dynamics within the text is a part of the baptist vision itself insofar as one aspect of the Bible is utilized in another: this is that. This chapter is an inquiry into how

¹ John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (New York: Penguin, 1987), 46. Readers may note slight variations in capitalization and spelling among modern editions of Bunyan’s work.

McClendon used literary tools such as metaphor, catachresis, and picture-thinking to constructively clarify doctrines as he read the biblical text.

This is part one of two chapters that deal with the employment of literary tools. This first part, this chapter, deals with types of literary tools that McClendon uses to understand the textual intention of a passage better. He uses metaphor and catachresis to clarify the doctrines of salvation, atonement, and creation. He uses picture-thinking to clarify eschatology.

7.1 Metaphor and Catachresis

Metaphor and catachresis are an outworking of the baptist vision of “this is that,” which McClendon has applied to the doctrines of creation, salvation and atonement. After defining catachresis, we will look further at these doctrines, at how McClendon sees certain problems, how catachresis is a tool used to clarify aspects of a doctrine, how it relates to baptist theology, and how this tool can find further use.

McClendon explains a specific literary structure called “catachresis” as something related to metaphor. Catachresis can be defined as

the deliberate (as opposed to accidental or mistaken) use of language drawn from one sphere in order to indicate something in another sphere that eludes existing speech. [...] Where linguistic gaps appear and are filled in one or another of these ways, the result is “misuse” only by the standard of prior use in an earlier setting. It may in fact constitute creative employment of the terms in new senses. Such was the apostolic practice. (II, 107)

Meanwhile, he defines metaphor (using Janet Soskice’s definition) as: “a form of language *use*...with a unity of subject-matter and which yet draws upon two (or more) sets of associations, and does so, characteristically, by involving the consideration of a model or models.”²

² II, 216, quoting (with emphasis added) Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 49.

McClendon is a bit hesitant to consider the use of catachresis in doctrine to be a type of metaphorical theology. He sees metaphor as too broad a concept to be clear in this instance, which is true, given that theories of metaphor abound.³ McClendon is worried, citing the example of Sallie McFague (II, 37), that metaphorical theology can render the events of the biblical narrative unrealistic. What does he mean by this? No extended treatment is given on how certain uses of metaphor do this (including, but by no means limited to, feminist approaches like McFague's), except for the treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity later in the second volume, where he discusses feminist objections to the language of "Father, Son, Spirit."⁴ His objections to metaphor (or at least some uses of metaphor) are a bit unclear, but McClendon, given that he is an egalitarian and actually comfortable with a fair amount of feminist exegesis, could be resisting a deployment of metaphor that undermines or renders agnostic the realistic images and events of revelation in Scripture. In McFague's case, she sees all revelation of God as indirect through human language, thus rendering claims of revelation generalized and pluralistic.⁵ Metaphors are employed on the presumption of the absence of God from language rather than God's presence in it.⁶ Therefore, McClendon's objection might be that, while sympathetic to feminism, he disagrees with some feminist readings that demote the Bible's claims to revelation. Thus, with metaphors he exercises caution: "Metaphors are not the furniture of some fairyland of

³ See Alison Gray, *Psalms 18 in Words and Pictures: A Reading Through Metaphor* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), ch. 1. Gray offers a comprehensive survey and account of different theories of metaphor, which she applies to her exegesis of Psalm 18. In comparison, while McClendon's account of catachresis is much more simple, it is not unlike Gray's account (31). Gray's technical discussion of types and theories of metaphor (7–29) could easily expand the theological work that McClendon began.

⁴ However, McClendon's progressive Biblicism actually allows him far more room for revision of traditional categories than one might suspect from his earlier statement (given that there is feminine imagery for God in Scripture). While McClendon grants the possibilities of patriarchal ideologies forming from this language and even grants that alternate language (i.e., "Parent, Child") can appear alongside the classical terms, he does not think replacing the language of the biblical text on the basis of their being "metaphorical" is wise: "the proposed substitutes have their own defects" (II, 321). Nevertheless, in his doctrine of creation, McClendon reiterates, "God was not a biological father" (II, 164). He even goes on to point out the mother-language of God in creation (II, 165).

⁵ Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 34.

⁶ McFague, *Models of God*, 196.

unreal or pretended existence; metaphor is not an alternative to true utterance, or a way of avoiding the (literal) truth, but a native device for speaking the truth in as plain and helpful a way as may be” (II, 216).⁷

Thus, he does say that “metaphors are often created by catachresis” (II, 217), but he wants to be very particular as to the process of how the apostles came to reflect on the real events of redemption in Christ, placing catachresis alongside typology. Catachresis is a deployment of metaphor through a realistic process. This is similar to how the real events of the biblical narrative and Christ’s life form “types.” In fact, he sees it as a kind of subset of typology (II, 37), a part of the “this is that” prophetic vision of Scripture (II, 105). We might say catachresis is to the Bible’s simple imagery, language, or concepts what typology is to more complex figures. *Catachresis is one way how “this” came to be understood as “that” within the Bible.* This dynamic upholds and is a part of the literal sense of the text. The literal sense is, for McClendon, as we recall, the whole hermeneutical act of reading the biblical text realistically in the church, in order for the church to be equipped to act like Christ (II, 36). “Literary theories that discard the plain sense are suspect” (II, 37). As far as feminism is concerned, McClendon is convicted about promoting the liberty of others *because of* the reality of biblical revelation, not despite it.

Thus, we see this employment of metaphor via catachresis in the doctrines of salvation, atonement, and creation—each respecting, McClendon would argue, the native intentionality and literary devices of the biblical text as they are employed doctrinally. As we will see, some of these doctrinal clarifications are not necessarily unique to the baptist tradition, but they do affect baptist identity.

⁷ On identifying whether a metaphor is “real” or not, see Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54. Swinburne locates the word or statement within its genre in order to ascertain its reference to reality.

7.1.1 Salvation

McClendon's direct employment of catachresis is for the language for salvation. In doing so, he is able to offer a more discipleship-oriented statement of the doctrine.⁸

He begins by stating his dissatisfaction with five prior formulations of salvation: (1) the failure of Reformed scholasticism to accurately elaborate the *ordo salutis* (the attempts to place terms of salvation such as justification and sanctification into a linear process of stages), (2) the excesses of emotional revivalism, (3) the dichotomy of social and personal salvation in the Social Gospel and liberation theology, (4) Barth's replacement of "experience-centered theology with a doctrine of salvation already achieved in advance," and finally, (5) the neglect of salvation as embodied in the life of a community, implying the divorce of salvation from morality and the life of the church (II, 104). By clarifying the *images* of salvation, he hopes to productively continue on to construct a different *order* of salvation.

Placing the reader back into the world of the early church, he says, "How is the truly extraordinary ever to be named?," referring to the event of Christ's salvation in the church (II, 106). He answers with catachresis: "Meeting that need, the first Christians found a language, mainly in the Scriptures, that could address the newness" (II, 106). He notes a language of law (justification), holy rite (sanctification), medicine (healing) and military rescue (saving), kinship (adoption), commercial exchange (redeeming, reconciling), as well as a host of images borne from the Old Testament (Exodus, birth, sojourning to the promised land; see II, 106, 108). These he discusses according to his three-strand ethic: organic, social, and anastatic. The first to be addressed is bodily imagery: being "in" Christ, and sanctifying images.

⁸ It should be noted that McClendon distinguishes salvation as a set of stages, not one-time events, in keeping with stages of discipleship: see II, 137.

1. *Being “in” Christ*:⁹ McClendon argues that this does not refer to mystical union in the sense of complete absorption, but is a relational phrase, meaning being present to one another and taking up a certain character. It uses the *spatial* catachresis of a container to communicate a new individual and communal character of life (II, 114).¹⁰

2. *Sanctification*:¹¹ McClendon points out that sense of being “sanctified” in the New Testament (*hagia* and related words) is a catachresis of the Old Testament notion of ritual purity (*qodosh*, etc.). “Holiness” connotes the awesome presence of YHWH that awakens a response. Contact with the holiness of God sanctifies, making something complete, as in the consecration of the seventh day at the completion of creation. Christ through the cross makes holy his people for their work (II, 114–15). Holiness, therefore, is also achievable in human practice, rather than an unattainable ideal: “be holy as I am holy” (Lev. 20:26, cf. Matt. 5:48, Luke 6:36).

The second strand is social. For relational (social) images, he discusses faith and justification.

1. *Faith*:¹² McClendon notes that what is rendered in English as “faith” or “trust” is *pistis* (and related words) in Greek, which was chosen to replace the Hebrew term *he-emin* when the Old Testament was being translated into Greek. Faith, for a believer, is a catachresis of the Hebrew concept implied in *he-emin*, which connotes that faith is like the trust of a nursing child to a parent, or the reliability of the parent for the child (II, 110–11). The Hebrew notion of faith implies trust in the reliability of God, whose character is displayed in the narratives (II, 110). Thus, as Abraham trusted God’s character, New Testament believers trust the good news of

⁹ Cf. Phil. 3:9; Gal. 2:19; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 12; Col. 1:27.

¹⁰ While McClendon is skeptical of metaphysical statements that are not grounded pragmatically, Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz offers a reading of “being in Christ,” in which a “theo-ontology” of participation involving the divine name develops. See Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 360–73.

¹¹ Cf. Gen. 2:3; Lev. 10:3; Ex. 29:43; Ez. 20:41; Isa. 6:3; Rom. 6:22; 1 Thess. 4:7; 1 Pet. 1:2.

¹² Cf. Isa. 60:4; Deut. 7:9; Ps. 78:37; Gen. 15:6.

Jesus' work. In Anabaptist fashion, faith does not mean merely holding certain statements to be true, but trusting such things with one's actions.

2. *Justification*:¹³ McClendon notes that for a believer to be "justified," the Greek terms (*dikaiois*, etc.) assume the background of Old Testament legal terms (*tsadeq*, etc.), which again are a catachresis of the ancient courtroom to the present believer. As a sinner may feel as though "on trial" for their sins, Scripture reminds the sinner that God is king and this means God is also judge and lawgiver, with the power to acquit or condemn (II, 111). God in Christ, who bore our accusations, means resurrection is a sign of acquittal and a new age of life (II, 112). Justification refers to the ongoing keeping of right relationships between God and people on the one hand and between people on the other, and therefore is not static in nature. Justification has a communal and ethical dimension connected to Christ's love, as a summary of the law: right relationships are maintained by living Christ's love in community (Mark 12:28–31; John 15:10–12; Gal. 5:14; 1 John 3:23, etc.). Thus, noting the (often presumed) differences between Paul and James, McClendon concludes that justification by faith is not in opposition to obedience or action (II, 112).¹⁴

This notion is strongly influenced by Yoder's expositions of these terms, which are worth mentioning as examples of how this baptist understood rituals and doctrines in passing. Justification, as Yoder points out concerning Galatians, is theologically indistinguishable from a life of racial reconciliation.¹⁵ If Jews and Gentiles were not becoming one people in Christ, there would be no problem of justification by faith.¹⁶ The problem of justification of works was

¹³ Cf. 1 Sam. 8; Gen. 15:6; Job 10:2; Mk. 12:31.

¹⁴ McClendon acknowledges that forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, family language, and friendship are all images, but he did not have space to treat these comprehensively. So he states, "Each of these arose from some biblical context where it displayed an earlier sense; each shifted its sense in the Old Testament or the New or both as it was selected to bear (partial) witness to the new thing God did in Christ" (II, 113).

¹⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 11.

¹⁶ Cf. C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987),

whether one needed to become ethnically a Jew in order to be “in” the people of God, or whether a law like circumcision, which seemed to be a great cause for arrogance among early Jewish Christians, was justifiable through Christ’s fulfillment and summary of the law. It was not a question of whether obedience was necessary to being a Christian, but rather what type of obedience.

The third strand is anastatic. For anastatic images, McClendon discusses the images of walking, way, liberation, and becoming a disciple.

1. *Way/Walk*:¹⁷ McClendon notes that the early Christians were called followers of the “way,” with the life of faith referred to as a “walk.” This is a catachresis from the Old Testament image of choosing ways leading either to life or death, with the former reconceived in Christ as the “way to the father” (John 14:5–7). This road-based catachresis is also connected to imagery of the “doorway” into the “kingdom.” Way imagery is also integral to McClendon’s ethics (cf. I, 49, 69).

2. *Liberation/Redemption*:¹⁸ McClendon demonstrates this image’s connection to slavery practices and to the Exodus. This imagery is connected with acts of freedom and new citizenship. In discussing liberation theology, McClendon notes that the Gospel frees men and women from slavery to sin, into a new polity of the kingdom of God, where people live new, free lives under that rule.

ch. 10. While it is certainly not the place of this thesis to argue this, it would seem that an Anabaptist view of the Law-Gospel relationship and doctrine of justification could provide some wisdom to the debates on what is called “the New Perspective on Paul,” given that Anabaptist views see justification and the necessity of obeying the law as not at odds with one another. This “New Perspective” was kicked off in 1977 by E. P. Sanders in *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004). James D. G. Dunn offered more clarity in his essays in 1982 in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). This view was brought into mainstream evangelicalism by N. T. Wright, whose main academic work on the matter was *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

¹⁷ Cf. Ps. 16:11; Jer. 32:39; Mic. 4:2; Acts 9:2; 1 Cor. 12:31; Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 7:17; Gal. 5:16, etc.

¹⁸ Cf. Ex. 15:13; Ps. 69:18; Ps. 19:25.

3. *Disciple*: McClendon points out the obvious catachresis of the life of faith today to being a student of Christ. Christ referred to his students as disciples, and Christians today are still learning in the “school of Christ” (II, 32). Viewing all life as a classroom, students of Christ, he notes, are always being taught, being tested, growing, and learning in dynamic ways.

In order to clarify this doctrine further in baptist theology, he creates a categorical organization of the imagery into three dimensions: salvation as right relationship, presence, and new way of life. Here he observes that, very loosely, there are the three emphases of Catholicism, Protestantism, and the baptists. As we began to note in an earlier chapter, Catholicism emphasizes presence (in particular through the sacraments). Protestantism emphasizes restored relationship (mainly through the doctrine of justification). Meanwhile, baptists emphasize the taking up of a new way of life.¹⁹ What this means is that practical ethics tend to orient baptist theology and worship where theology orients doctrine and worship in Protestantism, and liturgy for theology and ethics in Catholicism. In many ways, to speak of such a taxonomy is an oversimplification rather than a general observation (which we have critiqued in Chapter Four). Each of the three includes aspects of each of the other two streams (I, 109), and all three emphases have their downsides. Thus, McClendon notes that these three must be seen through a holistic understanding of ethics, corresponding to the three strands: organic (presence), social (right relationships), and anastatic (new way of life). Nevertheless, baptist life has tended toward a close relationship between obedience and taking up a new life in Christ as constitutive of that event in a unique way.

¹⁹ The Anabaptist theme of salvation as obedience is found in Arnold Sider, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2004), 139. Similarly, see Kraus, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, 173: “In Anabaptism salvation was understood as the genuine possibility for a new life under the lordship of Christ.” Linked with atonement theology, a Baptist theologian that would provide remarkable similarity and further supplement would be Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

Thus we see a “this is that” dynamic occurring in more than one way in the doctrine of salvation. These various images are the language by which the early disciples naturally understood the new and unique event of salvation that they witnessed in Christ. This move to understand salvation as something like “now being perfectly ritually clean” or “legally acquitted” came naturally to the disciples as they rooted themselves in what we have come to call the Old Testament Scriptures. For today’s readers, who may understandably look at biblical image-language as foreign, we can use the notion of catachresis to unpack the process that the disciples experienced with less effort. As McClendon stresses for baptist soteriology, far from a notion of salvation being a one-time act of grace, enabling possible moral laxity, these images imply an ongoing taking up of discipleship. A believer, while certainly imperfect, is such as he or she resolves constantly to take up Christ-like action.

7.1.2 Atonement

McClendon’s chapter on the “Saving Cross: Atonement” is perhaps the most paradigmatic chapter in his whole trilogy, in that it incorporates several tools to accomplish its constructive work.²⁰ Its integrated combination of historical insights, biblical theology, and ethical implications, clarified and enriched by multiple literary tools (grammar, midrash,²¹ typology, metaphor, etc.) make this chapter exemplary for the present study. Here McClendon clarifies the doctrine through discussing “metaphors” for the atonement. Metaphors are deployed

²⁰ We might see this as a tiny treatment in comparison to the mammoth works such as Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert Walker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), chapters 1–2.

²¹ Midrash is a tool that McClendon briefly mentions in order to understand the function and plurality in doctrinal readings, specifically in regards to the atonement. Since it is not a very important tool, it is not treated in this research project.

in the New Testament by the catachresis process from the Old. These metaphors include aspects that are legal, military, kinship-redeemer-oriented, and sacrificial.²²

1. *Legal*:²³ The disciples read the trial of Jesus as having legal significance for the whole fate of the humanity and not merely as a narrative of one man executed for blasphemy. Understanding this, McClendon argues that there is “no straight path from the Epistles to the penal atonement doctrines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (II, 217–18); for the justice that propelled Christ, like the figure of Isa. 53, to bear the iniquities of others was actually motivated by the injustice of the world, not God, but counted as a gift on God’s part in hindsight. “There is no New Testament example of a courtroom metaphor where God is the righteous judge, Christ the defendant, and the cross a penalty paid” (II, 219).²⁴ Thus, the judgment of the cross through the resurrection is not condemnation or punishment but acquittal.

2. *Military*:²⁵ The disciples saw the event of the resurrection as something like a military victory. Piggybacking on the insights from the metaphors of his fourth chapter, McClendon points out that the “powers and principalities”²⁶ or “elemental spirits”²⁷ are often both demonic and cosmic as well as social and political, enslaving those that worship them. With this connection, the (nonviolent) atonement was the way Christ “beat” the dark powers, offering liberation from them (II, 219–20). The cross is the path of all believers, with its witness of

²² See J. C. Wenger, *Introduction to Theology* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1954). Wenger offers several similar aspects, although he does not delineate these using catachresis.

²³ Isa. 53:8, cf. Heb. 5:8, 9:28; Rom. 4:25, 5:18; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:27; 1 Pet. 1:22–25.

²⁴ In full: “Thereby he broke the barrier of such insider-outsider exclusion, redeeming those who loved him from the power of all ‘curse’ laws. It is not that God cursed Christ and had him crucified. Rather it is that Christ, by taking his place as one accursed (hanged or crucified) broke through that ‘curse’ rule: Disciples certainly could not count Christ ‘accursed.’ Having taken his beloved body down from the cross, how were they to reckon him, or anyone else in that same humbling fix, unclean or ‘accursed’? ...[T]he attempt to make Christ accursed by shamefully executing him had extended hope of salvation to all—even the perpetrators of the curse themselves. ...Here is full metaphor; two sets of association merge. At Calvary not Pilate but God is Judge; not Jesus’ sins, but ours are judged; but punishment issues from God’s judgment neither for Jesus nor for us, for in this case God’s judgment is acquittal and life in the Spirit” (II, 218).

²⁵ Cf. Gal. 4; Eph. 1:19–21, 2:15; Col. 2:15.

²⁶ Paul refers to the “powers and principalities” in Eph. 3:10, 6:12 Col. 1:16, 2:15.

²⁷ Paul refers to the “elemental spirits” in Gal. 4:3 Col. 2:8, 20.

obedience, prayer, and even martyrdom, which potentially disarms the forces of hate and violence, political as well as demonic, as it anticipates the promise and final victory of resurrection.

3. *Kinship-Redeemer-oriented*:²⁸ Christ on the cross was like a kinsman-redeemer. Often the term “redeem” is used without any consciousness of how the Old Testament uses it. The redeemer (Heb.: *goel*) is a person that avenges or restores transgressed members of their kin, whether they were physically wronged (as in Job) or become financially compromised through loss of land, enslavement, or destitution (such as by the loss of their husbands, as with Ruth and Naomi). Christ “redeems” humanity from slavery through paying the “ransom” of humanity’s slavery by his blood (II, 222).²⁹

4. *Sacrificial*:³⁰ McClendon stresses the need for catachresis in understanding the atonement narrative as sacrificial, since it does not resemble a sacrifice in any ordinary sense (II, 225). He points out that there are many theories of the atonement, as a consequence of the loss of understanding of the internal logic of sacrifice displayed in the world of the Bible (II, 222). Going into depth as to the ancient understanding of blood in sacrifice, pagan notions saw ritual sacrifice as participating in the life force of a god through consumption of blood. By contrast, Israel saw God as spirit, so blood was off limits for consumption but still culturally meaningful. In the Exodus, then, blood was painted over the doors as a sign of God passing over that household in peace, creating a connection between sacrificial blood and liberation. This sacrifice and liberation was displayed in Jesus going to the cross, shedding his blood not as a punishment

²⁸ Cf. Dt. 26:5; Ex. 21:24; Num. 18:15–16, 35:11; Jer. 32:6; Ruth 4; Prov. 23:10; Isa. 41:14.

²⁹ See Scot McKnight’s exegetical and historical defense of the authenticity of ransom language in *Jesus and His Death* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), ch. 7.

³⁰ Cf. Isa. 53:7, 10; Ex. 12; 1 Cor. 10–11; Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn. 2:2, 4:10; Heb. 4:14, 5:1–10, etc. This short account, of course, could be greatly enriched and supplemented by more in-depth studies, such as Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

inflicted on himself, but as a sign of covenantal peace.³¹ Since “priest and offering were one” (II, 225), Jesus’ actions were both priestly and sacrificial causing expiation of sin, sealing a new covenant, offering a way for believers to follow.

Taking all of these together, we see McClendon being careful to show his particularly baptist emphasis: that the nonviolent cross was “God’s way, God’s *only* way” (II, 236). Thus, McClendon proceeds to offer his atonement theology, looking at several historical views on the atonement while attempting to reclaim the ethos of the original atonement doctrine.

Earlier, McClendon hints at this through his historical work. True to the “restoration” theme in his thought (the approach that seeks to understand and live out the church in its earliest essence, before certain “Constantinian” missteps occurred), McClendon seeks a kind of recovery of something closer to the early church paradigm of the atonement. He goes to Diognetus and Irenaeus for this. Diognetus saw the cross as the exchange of God for us, by virtue of which Christians are to be, in effect, “‘gods’ to their neighbors” (II, 201). Irenaeus saw the atonement as a nonviolent recapitulation and ransom. Satan’s disobedience was defeated by Christ’s obedience, which Christians are to emulate.

Following the work of J. Denny Weaver,³² McClendon sees a kind of “Constantinian” fall of the doctrine of atonement (although he never affirms a complete fall like some other baptists do) as Christianity moved from a persecuted minority into a state religion. Cappadocian ransom theory has God defeating Satan by trickery and deception. McClendon writes disapprovingly:

Here is a story whose political import has taken a new direction. Such divine deception could too easily serve as the legitimization of imperial power maintaining its “righteous”

³¹ This point is also made in Kraus, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, 182.

³² See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). While Weaver’s early historical work on the formation of the doctrine of atonement is important for McClendon, Weaver can further supplement McClendon’s work through his engagement with black liberation, feminist, and womanist objections to penal substitutionary atonement.

empire by hook or by crook—a vice common enough in that era to have given us the adjective “Byzantine” as a label for devious knavery as a path to power. A theology of atonement that began by reflecting politics of Jesus had slipped into the service of the standing order. (II, 202–3)

We should note that, characteristic of much of McClendon’s historical work, the claim to a fall of the doctrine of atonement is not demonstrated with much depth, much less the connection between this particular ransom theory and deceptive politics.³³ Nevertheless, insofar as the way of the cross no longer implied nonviolence and became disconnected from the exercise of political power, the doctrine of atonement did fall from its earlier, fuller force—or, we might say, its deliberate *lack* of force.³⁴

Anselm, for McClendon, constitutes another Constantinian accommodation, as the metaphors of atonement only work through the brutal mechanisms of medieval law, thus making the cross again uphold the current social order. Through Anselm, “The law of the universe, then, was the law of retribution” (II, 205).³⁵ What this effectively accomplished in Christendom’s politics is the disparity between the powerlessness of the cross and the power of the political order. Since the atonement paradigm was communicated and therefore accommodated using the political grammar of the time, politics no longer had to be configured by the nonviolence that the cross implied.

McClendon continues to give treatments of historical readings of atonement from Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Grotius, as well as Abelard and Bushnell, expressing varying degrees of

³³ As Benjamin Myers points out, the “fishhook” analogy is often misunderstood. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, does not use it to communicate the intentional defeat of Satan by deceptive means. The deceived fish is the personification of death, who greedily and foolishly swallows Christ’s humanity in death, which causes the metaphysical overcoming of death by God’s life. The fishhook is an overt analogy. See Myers, “The Patristic Atonement Model,” in *Locating Atonement*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), ch. 3.

³⁴ For a comprehensive sourcebook on nonviolence in the early church, see Ronald Sider, ed., *The Early Church on Killing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

³⁵ A few scholars have remarked that McClendon is very heavy-handed in his criticism of classical doctrines; see Barry Harvey, “Beginning in the Middle of Things: Following James McClendon’s *Systematic Theology*,” *Modern Theology* 18:2 (Apr. 2002): 260.

appreciation and concern, but ultimately approving of the Anabaptists.³⁶ McClendon is especially drawn to the Anabaptists that saw the link between the cross, discipleship, and witness as utterly integral, often to the point of disavowing political power and violence (II, 206).³⁷ Anabaptists such as Michael Sattler saw, as McClendon states, that “Christ’s work was to be shared by true disciples. Did not Paul say that ‘I fill out in my body what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ’ (Col. 1:24)?” (II 206). It was the Anabaptists that saw the atonement not as a mere object of belief, but as a calling, the way for the Christian community to be ordered. Thus, this historical insight leads McClendon to offer his typological doctrine of atonement, that the cross *then* is first and foremost the way of the disciples *now*:

A striking feature of the Gospels is that just as they tie the identity of Jesus (the one in their story) to the identity of the risen Christ (the one known in their readers’ experience), they also invite contemporary readers to identify themselves with the wayward but transformed disciples of the story. The Gospels rhetorically invite readers to *become* participating disciples. (II, 228)

To read the Gospels as the story of God is to read the cross as the story of all disciples. He writes in conclusion,

Had [the disciples in their disobedience] had their way, there would have been no cross; had [Jesus] had his, there would have been thirteen. They declined the honor. One betrayed him; one denied him; all fled (Mark 14:50). He was executed with some other enemies of the powers that be – he alone on a cross where all were to have borne witness. Christ was in their place – by the baptist vision, it was our place. He was buried then, one for all. God was dead. ...The resurrection was God’s sign of self-identification with Jesus who had taken the nonviolent way of the cross. It was God’s way, God’s *only* way. ...God’s rule, by the way of the cross, prevailed. (II, 235–36)

³⁶ See J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1997).

³⁷ See for example, Walter Klaassen, ed. *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener: Herald, 1981), chapter 4. The chapter is titled, “Cross, Suffering, and Discipleship,” which demonstrates the obvious connection all Anabaptists made between atonement, discipleship, and martyrdom.

The atonement does not merely seem to be something Christ did, embodying the imagery of the Old Testament, but something that the church does. The church bears its cross for the nations as it follows Christ. McClendon writes in his section on creation and suffering (a topic we will turn to shortly), meditating on Romans 8:17–25,

Paul does not begin with the idea of a perfect creation later marred (as does much subsequent theology, Catholic and Protestant); his starting point is present Christian suffering. Paul and his readers had to share the *excruciating* way of the cross. Yet this sharing was the way to a glorious future which far outweighed in importance all it cost. (II, 169)

The cross of Christ, as McClendon notes, employs a complex of mixed metaphors, seamlessly reflecting on this event through the images of the past. This process was so automatic for the early Christians, but the logic of atonement appears foreign to modern readers. Catachresis is a way of analyzing the ancient imagery in order to make the cross intelligible again. McClendon's articulation here offers a means by which the atonement is held in a unity through the "this is that" dynamic. Christ's way of the cross is the Church's way.

7.1.3 Creation

"Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over? Those
the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will
crown their heads."

Here, as Isaiah 51:9–11 says, the return from exile that the prophet envisions is communicated as similar to the mythic slaying of metonymic monsters of chaos (Rahab), an act of creation ("the depths," indicating primal waters of the first chapter of Genesis), as well as an act of exodus (dried-up sea so that "the redeemed might cross over"). This is that. McClendon contends that creation in Scripture is not merely an event in the past, but something happening

now. It involves a Creator that has empowered his creation to be free and responsive, and his church especially to be a partner in the suffering work of Christ to bring a new creation about. Creation is ongoing, and by looking at select images for creation in the Bible, he makes his argument.

First we must understand what challenges a thorough doctrine of creation may face today. McClendon maps out five theses of what the doctrine of creation entails (II, 149): (1) God is the origin and source of all. (2) Creation is perceived as God's ongoing blessing. (3) The creative divine rule is nevertheless under constant attack. (4) God's rule is both displayed and enhanced by creation. (5) Creation has a terminus or goal.

These tenets are under fire from three sources: (1) atheism that asserts a self-sufficient universe; (2) creation science, which unwisely seeks to get Christianity to place "false trust in itself," diminishing the whole display of God's goodness in creation; and (3) process theism that can undermine the personal agency of God in the ongoing struggle for a new creation, which is creation's end (II, 149–50).

McClendon is (especially in tandem with his wife, Nancey Murphy) a learned person of science, able to offer scientific insights that go beyond what the typical theologian is capable of articulating, but he does resist scientism. Interestingly, his close literary reading actually makes him critical of, rather than accommodating to, science:

The biblical writers responded critically to the (mythic) 'popular science' of their day; shall we respond less critically to the (still mechanistic) popular science of our own? Biblical writers accepted some of the language, some of the plot, and some of the themes of their ancient context. But they rejected other language, other plot elements, other themes found in that same material. This critical response was made in order that the Scriptures might confess and proclaim God the Creator in terms its first readers could comprehend, terms by which they might shape their lives and reshape their world. (II, 154)

Thus, McClendon proceeds to offer his full account of creation using catachresis to clarify how creation as an event in primordial history is something ongoing now, in Christ and in the church. Where is God in creation? McClendon responds with the church, its social practices of love,³⁸ its awareness of human createdness and creatureliness, and more importantly, its call with all humanity to being creative also (II, 159). This notion of ongoing creation continues and borrows largely from George Hendry. On this basis McClendon discusses five catachretical metaphors for God's action in creation: molding, struggle, design-execution, artistic expression, and generation.³⁹

1. *Molding*:⁴⁰ Creation is understood using imagery from the action of pottery. Creation (this) is like pottery (that). As it is applied through catachresis from pottery to creation to moral formation, molding gets used to understand how God forms human character, which must neither be too soft or too hard, for his purposes (II, 161).

2. *Struggle*:⁴¹ These Scriptures all employ imagery of conflict, taken from myths of battle with primeval monsters such as Leviathan, Rahab, the dragons, or the primordial chaos of the Sea, which is applied to the wrestling of God with evil and chaos for his creation, as well as to the church in Christ wrestling against the devil, tyrannical empires and idolatrous religions. This struggle in Christ implies suffering as a part of the new creation coming into being (II, 162).

3. *Design-Execution*:⁴² Scripture employs the image of the architectural "design" of the tabernacle to speak of creation. However, this is used in a "this is that" way by Christ to refer to his body (John 2:19), as well as the moral design of the call of God's people (II, 163, cf. 1 Cor. 3:16).

³⁸ McClendon's brief exposition of the Lord's Prayer (or as he calls it, the Disciples' Prayer) as prayer for engaging creation is noteworthy (II, 155–56).

³⁹ McClendon cites George Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

⁴⁰ Cf. Isa. 44:24; Gen. 2:7; Isa. 45; Job 33:6; Rom. 9:19; Jer. 18:1–11.

⁴¹ Cf. Isa. 27:1; Isa. 51:9; Ps. 74:13, 89:11; Gen. 3; Job. 1–2; Mark 1:13; Rev. 20:10.

⁴² Cf. Ex. 31: 1–5; Ex. 25:40; Ps. 139:13.

4. *Artistic Expression*:⁴³ These Scriptures also use the image of a creative artist. This artisanal language is applied to creation by word and deed, like a painter or poet, thus also in Christ as “Word become flesh” (John 1). “Among the human arts the gossamer art of the word ranks highest of all” (II, 164).

5. *Generation*:⁴⁴ This language of parental generation uses both fatherly and motherly images. Fatherly images show adoptive grace, particularly identified in Christ as the Son. Motherly (and midwife) language is used quite extensively to speak of creation as birth and ongoing nursing (II, 165). This culminates in the casting of all humanity as children of God (Acts 17:29) with Christians as specifically adopted children (Rom. 8:14–17; Gal. 4:4–5; Eph. 1:4–6; 1 John 3:1–2), called to resemble their father’s character and mission, bringing glory and renewal to all creation.

All creation imagery has an ongoing and future orientation. These images portray a creation that is in process, and McClendon notes that even science supports a notion that creation is open and dynamic with new creative possibilities (II, 167)—far from the materialist clockwork universe or distant deism. He continues on to sketch out a doctrine of God’s ongoing creative work with the church. Creation means the possibility of a synergy between God, nature, and people. McClendon argues for a theology of the Creator who, while remaining reliable as to his character, is also self-giving in such a way that enables a free creation in a mutually responsive relationship. This involves suffering in love, which Christ took up and which the believers are called into.⁴⁵ Here McClendon reads Romans 8 and notes creation and the Creator’s mutual travail for the new creation, through the suffering of Christ. Creation groans with God as in

⁴³ Cf. Ps. 104:1–31; Gen. 1; Isa. 55:11; John 1:1–5.

⁴⁴ Cf. Isa. 64:8; Jer. 3:19; Matt. 11:27; Ps. 22; Ps. 131:2; Num. 11:12; Isa. 42; Job 32:18.

⁴⁵ McClendon cites Fiddes’ impressive study, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Fiddes in another work notes that the suffering of God actually is predominate in many Baptist theologies (those of James Hinton, H. Wheeler Robinson, Warren McWilliams, et al.), disproportionately more often than in comparison to other non-baptist theologians. See his *Tracks and Traces* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 57.

childbirth (cf. Isa. 42:14). As Christians take up the cross, they participate in the suffering that brings about the new creation in the Spirit (Rom. 8:26). God “co-operates” (or “synergizes”) for “the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28), and in the resurrection, the people of God have the promise of future glory (II, 169).

While there are many facets to McClendon’s doctrine of creation, we will pause to delineate this contour as it shows the connection between creation in the past, creation ongoing in Christ, and the role of the church.⁴⁶ This obviously demonstrates the “this is that” dynamic as an organizing principle. This connection illustrates the restoration of the “rule of God,” which is the motif of this section of *Doctrine*. McClendon connects this imagery of ongoing creation with the role of election and adoption to answer the problems of theodicy.⁴⁷ While there is senseless suffering and punitive suffering, believers are called to suffer with creation out of love, and to bring forth the new creation as Christ did in his suffering. Being elected⁴⁸ in Christ does not imply some double-predestination but rather, as it was in Abraham’s case (Gen. 12:1–3), election to being a blessing to all people, bringing the new creation into being. Election is election to

⁴⁶ In this section he discusses several aspects under the scheme (II, 181–85): (1) “God knows and cares,” referring to foreknowledge and salvific intention, (2) “God rules and overrules,” referring to providence and miracles, and (3) “God purpose and disposes,” referring to election. These unfortunately go beyond the scope of this study.

⁴⁷ The imagery of adoption is, as McClendon states, another employment of catachresis, albeit one that McClendon does not treat at length.

⁴⁸ We should note that McClendon disagrees with Barth on election. McClendon argues that election has a definitive reference to believers, their character and work. While the scope of this work is unlimited, “thus the universalist tinge” (II, 184), McClendon fears Barth’s doctrine of election can fall into the Reformed danger of having unregenerate church members, or “faith without following.” While Barth does employ the term election in a way biblical texts seem not to use it, the concern that Barth allowed for unregenerate church membership would be an inaccurate worry: see Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), chapter 6. It should be noted that since McClendon sees the Christian life as elected for service, he could ultimately agree with the doctrine of election in Karl Barth at least in its final scope and purpose. Ultimately, Barth’s doctrine, for McClendon, was just as bad as Augustine’s, creating the possibility of intangible salvation, church membership without regeneration (II, 183). However, perhaps similar to Barth, when McClendon considers some of the promises of salvation, he states that the inclusivity of the family of God has a “universalist tinge” (II, 184, as noted above). McClendon does not use the term election to understand this hopeful universalist dynamic, since salvation is rooted in the work of the kingdom through God’s adopted people; God’s rule intends complete restoration (II, 185), however McClendon does use other ways to talk about this possibility. Thus, while McClendon disagrees and differs with Barth’s parsing of the terms and their potential dangers, the end result is similar.

being saved and to bringing salvation in service (II, 184) to all people and to creation.⁴⁹ This requires suffering as Christ suffered, which God's people must see as a blessing. Creation then *is* the church in the New Testament, just as the Creator is none other than the one who was crucified and resurrected. The church then, almost sacramentally, becomes the church now and as it is on judgment day, helping to bring the new creation into reality, awaiting the resurrection and restoration of all things.

Thus, by using catachresis as a further specification of the "this is that" dynamic, McClendon is able to offer a holistic account of the doctrine of creation, moving from the material origin of the universe, ongoing providence, and the problem of theodicy, to the incarnation of Christ and the elected work and witness of the church.

While McClendon briefly mentions imagery for election and adoption (II, 184), baptism,⁵⁰ as well as titles for Christ,⁵¹ these mentions are relatively brief. There are many more applications of catachresis for clarifying doctrine: the identity of God in the Holy Spirit,⁵² the nature of the church,⁵³ etc. Catachresis allows for a natural account of how Scripture's imagery is employed by its writers, thus allowing clarifications on all the doctrines discussed. McClendon applies them to the doctrines of salvation, atonement, and creation, offering great aid to doctrinal construction. As this treatment shows, many of McClendon's thoughts could have gone further if

⁴⁹ For instance, see the description in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), chap. 6.

⁵⁰ See I, 266. Here McClendon briefly shows that baptism employs language of garments (Gal. 3:27), appeal for rescue (1 Pet. 3:21), divine unity (Eph. 4:5), spiritual presence (Acts 1:5), washing (Acts 22:16), renaming (1 Cor. 1:1–15; Acts 19:5; Matt. 28:19), and burial (Rom. 6:4–11; Col. 2:12). Paul Fiddes expands some of these images in *Tracks and Traces*, 107–17.

⁵¹ See II, 273–74. This is a significant missed opportunity. McClendon notes the metaphorical process through which Christ is understood as Messiah, Son of God, Savior, Word, God, and Son of Man (II, 274), but does not go into detail about the meaning of these central titles, which provide some of the most substantive material for understanding Christ's identity. For such a treatise see Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), ch. 2.

⁵² See Erik Konsmo, *The Pauline Metaphors of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

⁵³ Nigel Wright shows this as he delineates the church as people, body, and temple in *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 11–16.

he allowed more space (this is one of the disadvantages of only having one volume for theology proper in his *Systematic Theology*). Thus, McClendon's work might be seen as a door now opened to future work.

7.2 Picture-Thinking and Eschatology

McClendon derives the eschatological locus of his doctrine in part from Paul Althaus (1948) as "what lasts and what comes last...to this we may add its concern with the relation of these two, and thus with the course of history under the eyes of God" (II, 75, with some boldface emphases removed). Akin to metaphor is the employment of picture-thinking,⁵⁴ which McClendon uses in analyzing eschatological texts and doctrines. He uses picture-thinking both to clarify the intentionality and structure of certain passages and to clarify eschatological doctrine.

McClendon maps out five "episodes" of eschatology, which show some of the problems in constructing a definitive doctrine. First he notes that the earliest eschatologies of the church were pastoral and compensatory, especially Paul's writings in 1 Thessalonians (II, 70). Second, he looks to the episode that was initiated with Joachim of Fiore, which was visionary and reconstructive, "pointing the way to later reform" (II, 71). Third, he notes the eschatologies of the liberal-fundamentalist battles. Here he offers a brilliant analysis. Disagreeing with both sides ultimately, he notes that both held their (rather uneven) biblical interpretations out of ethical postures: liberal out of political optimism, fundamentalists out of cultural pessimism. Either way, "eschatology is clearly ethics" (II, 73). Fourth, he notes the response to the proposals of biblical scholars such as Weiss and Schweitzer that saw Jesus and his followers as fanatics anticipating the imminent end of the age. Barth formulated his Christocentric eschatology with an eye to how

⁵⁴ This discussion could easily take place in part two of this essay, as picture-thinking is an attempt to understand the intentionality of eschatological and/or apocalyptic statements in the Bible. It could also be seen as a kind of grammatical account of eschatological doctrine (but the notion of doctrine as "grammar" will be discussed later).

God's eternity was related to time, while Rahner delineated a transcendental eschatology. Fourth, in reaction to these thinkers, there came the "theologians of hope" such as Moltmann and Pannenberg, who insisted eschatology meant the hope of something new, placing Christianity on the side of historical and political change (II, 74). The final episode, for McClendon, occurred when South American theologians read Moltmann and were inspired to write their liberation theologies (II, 74).

As McClendon surveys the diversity of these approaches, this leads him to repeat the doubt of many: does eschatology "have any firm content at all?" (II, 75). To answer this, he outlines picture-thinking, which addresses how the same biblical pictures of the end can inform current ethical positions.

What is "picture-thinking"? McClendon defines this as "thinking that is governed by a depiction of the end toward which everything tends" (II, 66). This tries to stay close to the apocalyptic genre of Scripture, but allows the apocalyptic images to speak today in the "this is that" manner of their original intent.⁵⁵ He argues that this way of thinking about prophetic texts best allows the church to deploy them today in preaching:

Prophets render the biblical pictures or images in prophetic words, but the words must *evoke* as much as they represent; the pictures must come to life, must take shape, but can do so only as believers receive and retain and are themselves remade by these pictures. (II, 66)

To understand how they have this evocative power, McClendon offers six rules for pictures, gleaned from Wittgenstein: (1) *All seeing is "seeing-as."* Like Wittgenstein's famous "duck-

⁵⁵ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), 20–21. Bauckham notes three aspects of apocalyptic imagery: (1) Revelation's images are "images with evocative power inviting imaginative participation in the book's symbolic world"; (2) using allusions from the Old Testament and its settings' mythological world, the symbols prophetically play off of the fears and hopes of that world; (3) its images are not timeless symbols nor self-contained domains of meaning. "The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world" (22).

rabbit” puzzle, eschatological pictures are highly ambiguous and even polyvalent, forming multiple interpretations. Thus, McClendon states that all pictures are perspectival (II, 76). (2) *Future pictures are religious pictures.* Eschatological pictures are future-oriented and religious, placing them in a field that defies typical criteria for determining evidence (II, 77). (3) *Religious pictures of the future are not unreasonable.* While “non-religious” pictures claim their own rationality, eschatology is not unreasonable. (4) *Pictures form convictions.* Rather than all future pictures submitting to, for instance, empirical rationality, rationalities presuppose convictions about the future, informed by their own “pictures” (II, 77). (5) *How pictures are connected to others is what forms different interpretations of the same central pictures.* An eschatology might form around one or two central images, but the full interpretation forms out of a cluster of convictions, sometimes biblical, sometimes not (II, 77). (6) *The required connection need not be temporal, spatial, or causal.*

This means that while these pictures are read realistically (even “literally” in the way McClendon defines), they need not be bound to pre-modern cosmology or events in the early church. They can continue to speak, understanding that their referentiality is multi-faceted. However, these do not support the simplistic readings of, for instance, dispensationalism, who fanatically trying to line up the right chronology of current end events, or to bygone pre-Copernican medieval theologies that saw heaven as concretely “up” and hell “down,” with the sun revolving around the earth, etc. (II, 77). Nor can they be written off as mythological (in the Bultmannian sense). McClendon states,

But how are we to understand the pictures? To leap ahead, I believe the correct answer...[is] *literally*, a term I take to mean simply that they must be received *as* the true pictures that they are, and as the *sort* of picture that they are. More concretely, “literally” means not myths (at least not as that word is widely understood), not as a code to be deciphered, not as fragments of a puzzle to be assembled by clever modern fingers, and not as grotesque caricatures of themselves, but as the pictures, the true, glinting, dancing,

awesome, God-given visions that, collected, constitute promise and warning to God's people. (II, 91)

Thus picture-thinking attempts to reinstate the intentionality of eschatological imagery against some of its extremes. This is because these pictures are primarily intended for offering substance for Christ-like character. The pictures, some talking about universal salvation, others eternal torment, still others annihilation, are all prophetic language meant to steer the people back to God.⁵⁶

McClendon uses picture-thinking along with other literary tools to construct a better eschatology beyond some of the alternatives. Dispensationalists will want to decipher Revelation and Daniel in charts and make strict correspondence between today's politics and the Apocalypse. Philosophers and scientists might be quick to offer a "cool, clear, aseptic account, even a 'scientific' account that will shelve these powerful biblical pictures as an adult shelves the toys of childhood" (II, 91). Bultmannian de-mythologizers have sought to "transmute Scripture's base pictures into the gold of authentic self-awareness, leaving no mythical residue behind" (II, 91). Worse still, McClendon warns that we might view eschatological statements in a way that deludes us into thinking we can control history and hedge our bets. Scripture offers no such certainty before God. There are only the pictures as used in the baptist vision, calling believers in every age to act Christ-like, living each moment as in the last.

Before we continue, we could supplement McClendon's rules with those of Paul Fiddes. Fiddes' literary theory and theological insights are akin to McClendon's theology and style. In

⁵⁶ McClendon bears stark resemblance to the rhetorical notion of eschatology in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 420: "The entire context of the references to hell and its threat is its intent to call men back from paths of darkness lest they prefer it to the light. ...Mention of judgment always engenders mention of mercy, patience, compassion. ...This is the radical difference between the gospel's 'threatening' and unevangelical terror. The later is horrifying but not really serious, for it lacks any real character of appeal. The evangelical reference to judgment—that the Lord is to be feared (II Cor. 5:11)—is a qualified threat, because it is the other side of the invitation, of the abundant riches to which the kerygma attests."

the opening chapters of *The Promised End*, he engages the literary theories of Kermode, Frye, Ricoeur, and Derrida to discuss how eschatology and apocalyptic literature organize and shape the language of faith. He states four things: (1) the end organizes and unifies the whole (Kermode); (2) the end expresses human desire (Frye); (3) the end defers meaning (Derrida); (4) and the end opens up future possibilities (Ricoeur).⁵⁷ This adds further grammar to the organization of eschatological language.

Understanding the structure and function of eschatological pictures, we now turn to the content. Here, McClendon discusses the end time pictures—the last judgment, Christ’s return, resurrection, death, hell, and heaven—and sketches them all as part of the grander picture of the rule of God.

1. *Last Judgment*:⁵⁸ McClendon notes that judgment includes furnace- or fire-imagery taken from Israel’s prophets and their historical locations. The events of the past form paradigms for future rescue and judgment, following the “this is that” pattern. When it comes to a passage such as Matt. 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, he cites John Donahue’s position, which argues that the passage is concerned with treatment of missionaries in prison and this-worldly social justice. Matt. 25 is about what character lasts (loving the insignificant) and will be vindicated at what *comes* last: Christ as judge (II, 79). McClendon comments that while there is the total judgment in Revelation in which all rivals to the restoration of all things (including death and hades) will be judged, John’s notion of judgment seems to begin at our *present* experience of Christ, the future judgment intersecting with the present.

⁵⁷ Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), chs. 1–2.

⁵⁸ Cf. Matt. 25; 2 Pet. 2:6–9, 3:7–10; Rev. 20:14; John 5.

2. *Christ's Return*:⁵⁹ Again displaying the “this is that” dynamic, imagery for Jesus’ coming is often interconnected with his resurrection and even his transfiguration. Also, “second coming” passages have to be coupled with the passages that speak of Jesus’ current presence with us. For instance, the Gospel of John’s eschatology seems to connect the second coming to the coming of the Spirit. Paul similarly speaks of the ongoing presence of Christ as moments of *parousia*, which (along with other key terms in Paul’s eschatology) suggest less of an “arrival” in these instances and more of a “disclosure” or “visitation.” McClendon writes,

Traditional Christian teaching has merged these many “comings” and assigned them all to history’s end, but in doing so it may have drained the composite picture of its depth even while it intensified the distance between the first and later New Testament readers. If there is only one “coming,” and that at history’s end, then the early Christians’ anticipations were necessarily mistaken. We need a way of reading Scripture that does not force the picture of his coming into our own preconceived frames, but allows its visual depth to address us in our own contexts. (II, 82)

For the picture of the return of Christ, McClendon recommends two rules: that there is constant futurity despite past fulfillments (“he will come”) and that in the end, the future Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible (“this same Jesus”): “in our Lord’s day worship, in history’s course as yet unfinished, at our last end, and at *the* last end, it is ever *Jesus* Christ who comes” (II, 82).

3. *Resurrection*:⁶⁰ McClendon notes that the full ethical import of the picture of the resurrection is sketched out in *Ethics*, Part III. He also notes the plurality and ambiguity of afterlife images in the Old Testament and how the New Testament resurrection image reinterpreted the Old Testament. This helps us appreciate the uniqueness of the picture of complete resurrection that is anticipated in Jesus.

⁵⁹ Cf. Mark 8:38; Gal. 2:10; John 14:18, 8:20, etc.; Acts 1:11; Matt. 24:6.

⁶⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 4:8; 15; Rev. 21; Isa. 26:19, 53:10–12; Ezek. 37:1–14.

4. *Hell*:⁶¹ McClendon notes that many images (*sheol*, *hades*, *gehenna*) are rarely clarified and are often misused and abused by preachers (II, 85).⁶² These images of the future are taken from the memory of Israel's present and past. This is seen in, for instance, *gehenna*, the wasteland left over from the destruction of Jerusalem: "Hell is a reality long before death comes" (II, 86). He continues, "If we superimpose these several New Testament images upon one another, we have the sense of a future category (not always a 'place') of destruction, nonentity, failure, retribution, and utter loss—the denial of all that life strives for and by God's grace can be" (II, 85). He affirms three possible interpretations (1) hell as annihilation, (2) hell as finite and purgatorial, resulting in universal salvation, and (3) hell as endless. For him, none of the three commands an exclusive plausibility, but he notes that any end picture of judgment must be clarified in its relationship to forgiveness and redemption, while respecting the "enormous moral power of the picture of hell" (II, 86). Thus, McClendon's question is not whether hell has a place in theology, but how it is appropriately placed. "Jesus' use of this term was not to encourage speculation about further human exercises in eternity, but to warn about misconduct by God's own people now" (II, 102).

5. *Death*:⁶³ McClendon states that much of the theological impetus of the New Testament surrounded the question of why Christ died and died the way he did (II, 84). The answer is that through obedient death ("not my will but yours be done"), death itself has been disarmed and the kingdom redeemed.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Cf. Matt. 26:39; Phil. 1:21; Gen. 3:19; Rom. 5:12–17; 1 Cor. 15:26; Col. 2:15.

⁶² For a fuller discussion on these images for hell, see Brad Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hell, Hope, and the New Jerusalem* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010). For a historical survey of the doctrine, see Alan Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Jersak's work could greatly enrich McClendon's as he charts all the images for hell through the biblical narrative, showing their purgatorial and remedial qualities, making a cumulative case for a kind of possibility of universal salvation.

⁶³ Cf. Jer. 7 and 19; Ps. 23:4; Matt. 25:41.

⁶⁴ For a literary-theological reflection on the meaning of death, see Fiddes, *The Promised End*, ch. 3.

6. *Heaven*.⁶⁵ McClendon notes, with Barth, that describing heaven is the task of conceiving the unconceivable. Yet, while hell is a place of individual alienation, heaven has highly communal images and their accompanying security (e.g., household, society, city, etc.). Far from this image being about “pie in the sky when you die,” Jesus’ preaching of heaven was nothing short of a new politics as well as an end hope (II, 87). Heaven is not simply where people go after they die (although there is some question as to what this is in Scripture: soul-sleep, or being present with the Lord?). Heaven is something coming into the present, fully realized on earth in worship as the “earthly analog of heaven” (II, 88).⁶⁶

All of these images are a part of the rule of God, and understanding this helps explain the function of all the pictures together. McClendon writes,

The biblical vision of God’s rule is such a picture; more precisely, it is an “end-picture,” where end means both aim and limit of life. The end is where we end up; it is also the present intention or purpose that steers our course. Thus, God’s rule is unfailingly future-regarding: we live for the day when, beyond all depicting, the reality it depicts is complete. It is as well self-involving and community-involving: born in a prophet’s mind, this rule comes into its own as it is shared so that it guides life for a community. If we are Christian, we aim for the day when the vision comes true “on earth as in heaven.” (II, 66)

McClendon goes on to note many other pictures that enrich the “rule of God”: new heavens and new earth, the thief in the night, human figures, a great dragon, an earthquake, the millennium, keys, bowls, trumpets, etc. Sadly, having *Doctrine* restricted to one volume meant that McClendon had to sacrifice comprehensiveness for brevity. Nevertheless, in each image that he does treat, he shows the “this is that” principle, showing the connection from the Old Testament to Christ to the living of Christ in the church.

⁶⁵ Cf. Matt. 6:10; 2 Cor. 4:18–5:2; Phil. 3:20; Mark 1:12; Luke 10:17–20; Col. 2:15; Eph. 6:11; Mark 12:18–27; 1 Cor. 15:6; Gen. 28:10–22; 1 Kings 8:22; Rev. 4–5.

⁶⁶ For an expanded account of what heaven is and how it “has a history,” see Alister McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); and for a recent proposal toward a “holistic eschatology,” including a thorough engagement with controversial biblical texts on heaven and the eschaton, see J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

His doctrine of eschatology has other elements that are worth mentioning here. We have already noted in a previous chapter that McClendon does a brilliant job handling the problem of the delay of the *parousia* by offering a fuller description of the textual intention of Mark 13, using the baptism vision. He also does this through applying the imagery in a “this is that” manner to how these images have been powerfully lived out by someone like Hans Hut (connecting eschatology to the biographical method he earlier laid out). Hut lived a life fully committed to the truth, social justice, and prophetic proclamation, which ultimately led to his martyrdom (II, 94–96). Finally, the baptist vision calls all images to be interpreted through Christ, which McClendon demonstrates in his linking of eschatology to salvation, and of salvation to creation (Part I in *Doctrine*). “Christ is the center of history” (II, 97), and so rightfully Jesus is “the eschaton” as well (II, 100). Revelation, as well as all eschatological statements, must be read as being figured in Christ.⁶⁷ In doing so, these eschatological pictures, far from being meant to offer blueprints of the end-times, are the substance of Christ-like character in all ages of the church as the church awaits Christ’s visitation.

By describing these pictures, one is able to talk about not just what these pictures *are*, but what they *do*: they are used to inspire discipleship. This helps to explain the plethora of uses of apocalyptic in eschatology. As these oracles utilize imagery of the Old Testament, yet were spoken to the early church, and still speak today, calling radicals to live as in the last day, they are meaningful by the “this is that” dynamic that can aid in moral judgment and the worship of the baptist community.

⁶⁷ This has led to significant statements in Anabaptist eschatology, which see the cross as the center of the revelation of God, and so, therefore, the lens in which the wrath and supposed violence of God in Revelation must be interpreted. See Ted Grimsrud and Michael Hardin, eds., *Compassionate Eschatology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011); and Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, chap. 2.

7.3 Conclusion

We have seen several tools for understanding the “this is that” dynamic in the text. Catachresis, as a kind of understanding of the process of metaphor, helps us to understand how images within Scripture are applied to the drama of redemption, such as creation, atonement, or salvation, rendering them meaningful. Picture-thinking, similarly, helps us to understand that the future is communicated in apocalyptic images. In doing so, this helps to communicate the evocative power of these images to call the church towards Christ-like action and expectation in all ages of history, awaiting the end. Thus all of these tools help the present church to recover the past for the purpose of the future: “this is that, then is now. The present church is the primordial church and the church at judgment day.”

Chapter 8: Doctrine as Grammar and Speech-Acts

“I am not of the number of those men, which answer unto themselves such plenary knowledge and assurance of their ways, and of the perfection and sufficiency thereof, as that they peremptorily censure all men except those of their owne understanding.”
- John Smyth¹

As John Smyth insists, good baptist doctrine has always had a place for critical inquiry, improvement, and revision, which the following tools can aid. In the previous chapter we explored literary tools that gave body to McClendon’s central insight that the Bible’s meaning is interconnected in a “this is that” type fashion. In this chapter we will explore tools that McClendon uses to analyze, organize, and revise doctrine. This he does by thinking about doctrines, whether past or present, using three analogies: doctrine as the grammar of a language and doctrine as a speech-act. As we will see, these models are not perfect, but they are pedagogical and significantly aid the baptist vision. They offer aid for theologians to think through how Scripture and Christian tradition can still be spoken now.

First, we will look at “grammar” in all its meanings in McClendon. McClendon draws from Ludwig Wittgenstein and George Lindbeck to understand the nature of religion and doctrine. He also, as we will see, offered his own particular baptist understanding of the cultural-linguistic approach, as well as his own baptist way of understanding the grammar of doctrine. Second, speech-acts for McClendon present a way of holistically thinking about doctrines. As a baptist, he is committed to the fallibility of convictions, and thus, philosophically, speech-acts aid in this effort to clarify convictions.

¹ Quoted in Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believer’s Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1968), 297.

8.1 Doctrine as Grammar

McClendon, in *Doctrine*, offers the analogy that the Bible is like a language. What doctrine does for Christians is like what grammar does for language. Speaking biblically is the prerequisite for being a Christian or teaching Christian theology, much like speaking Russian is a part of Russian identity and a precondition of becoming a professor of Russian (II, 458). Christians speak biblically, but often they do not know how to do so fluently. This “how” is the grammatical analysis of doctrine. In offering this analogy, McClendon is making use of the philosophy of Wittgenstein and the doctrinal theory of Lindbeck to think creatively about how doctrines function like grammar in the baptist vision. As we will see, this analogy is helpful for clarifying a theological discourse, which McClendon uses in thinking through baptist identity, the nature of doctrine and religion, and the baptist vision.

To understand the notion that doctrine is like grammar, we will first look at how this conceptual analogy developed from Wittgenstein and Lindbeck (although McClendon in some ways preceded Lindbeck). By interacting with Wittgenstein, McClendon begins to formulate an account of religious language. Applying Lindbeck, McClendon articulates his baptist notion of doctrine. While there were others, of course, that thought this way,² these two were formative for McClendon. After we discuss these influences and applications, we will list his specific grammatical accounts of doctrines, which, as we will see, help to clarify, reformulate, and understand communality in doctrines on that particular topic.

² For instance, see Paul Holmer, *Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Richard H. Bell, “Theology as Grammar: Is God an Object of Understanding?” *Religious Studies* 11 (1975): 307–17; Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-Games* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

8.1.1 The Influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein, the eccentric philosopher of language, was fascinated by human communication. As McClendon also showed in his biography of Wittgenstein in *Witness* (III, ch. 6), he also had a subtle and enigmatic yet at times quite passionate faith that appears prevalent in his thoughts on language.³ Thought to be speaking in unison with atheist positivists, he argued in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that language is meaningful as a propositional picture of reality.⁴ This notion of language seemed to render non-material objects like God as meaningless, as the logical positivists attempted to demonstrate.⁵ However, for Wittgenstein, statements of religion and ethics are not without meaning, but unsayable and mystical.⁶

Later in his career, Wittgenstein redeveloped his model of language, shifting from propositional reference to contextual use. McClendon summarizes, “Words no longer make up propositions that picture the world; rather words are *part of* the world; they come together in activities, language-games, constitutive of practices that comprise the human world” (III, 51). Grammar or “depth grammar”⁷ is not merely the set of rules to construct a sentence, but rather the rules that govern the correct embodiment of “language-games” in “forms of life.”⁸

³ For a complete survey of this see Brian R. Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986): “The world is all that is the case” (proposition 1); “The world is the totality of facts, not things” (1.1); “The logical picture of the facts is the thought” (3).

⁵ This is presumably the meaning of the statement “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.

⁶ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists” (6.44). “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (6.522).

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) I:664.

⁸ As Nicholas Lash points out, it would be most correct to say that Christianity is a set of forms of life and language games, not necessarily more specialized than non-religious forms of life or language games, some overlapping with non-religious ones. Wittgenstein does not seem to intend any strict autonomy of religious language-games, but does assert their complex multiplicity and particularity. See Lash, “How Large is a ‘Language Game?’” *Theology* 87.715 (January 1984): 19–28.

Wittgenstein wrote, “To obey a rule is to follow a practice.”⁹ Language-games, governed by rules, are meaningful within their forms of life, which form the *a priori* of their meaningfulness.

Wittgenstein writes,

“How am I able to follow a rule?” if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following a rule in the way I do.

When I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”¹⁰

If grammar is the investigation into the rules that govern a practice, theology then is the exploration of the embodied essence of Christianity. “Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)”¹¹ This led him in his faith to understand the way of Christian knowledge to be true knowledge, but understood through a different way than modern epistemology.¹² For example, McClendon points out that Wittgenstein thought that only the practice of love, not strict empirical inquiry, can believe the historical resurrection. As McClendon clearly expanded upon this (as we saw in an earlier chapter), the historical Christ is not known like any other fact in history, but rather is known through obedience and faith.

While McClendon makes use of Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* (which we will get to shortly), he was thinking through the implications of grammar and language for doctrine before Lindbeck, interacting with Wittgenstein directly. In 1971, McClendon wrote “Homo Loquens: Theology as Grammar” (CW2, 125–40). In this, he asserts that knowledge of God is linguistic (CW2, 126), and that language is good and therefore adequate, as well as broken, due to sin (CW2, 127). Language is of fundamental importance for the theologian, as it links the self to its body, its psychic depths, and its past (CW2, 127) as well as to one’s identity, community and

⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I:200.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I:217.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I:373.

¹² For instance, see III, 225. Also see Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33.

relationships (CW2, 128). Interacting also with J. L. Austin (whose influence on McClendon we will also get to shortly), speech is a kind of action, and therefore the fact that humans are language-speakers means that human existence is marked by action (CW2, 130). Therefore, language is meaningful in contextual use, as Wittgenstein argued. As humans were created for language, God speaks and acts with that language as humans listen. God acts through language for (and in relation to) humans, who are linguistic animals. This relationship is the site of theology's meaning, its language-games and forms of life.

This implies several defensive arguments against modern criticism of religious language: Since God uses language, language cannot be inadequate to the cause God employs it for (CW2, 131). This answers the accusations of verification, i.e., that talk of God is on principle meaningless. While some God-talk is surely meaningless, it is meaningful when it is connected to the reality of redemptive act and speech. Also, McClendon points out that nothing can shield a statement from being fallible (CW2, 134). Thus, we see McClendon reflecting early in his career on the relevance of the language of Christian faith through Wittgenstein's philosophy.

8.1.2 The Influence of George Lindbeck

The second major influence on McClendon is George Lindbeck, who applied Wittgenstein's (and others') notion of language to doctrine. McClendon wrote on language before Lindbeck, but then later adopted Lindeck's work along with his own in his baptist theology.

Lindbeck offered a typology of three different kinds of doctrine: (1) propositionalist, (2) experiential-expressivist, and his own theory, (3) cultural-linguistic. The propositionalist view sees doctrine functioning as "informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities."¹³

¹³ George Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 16.

Theology of this form often struggles to be authentic to the phenomena of doctrinal development, revision, change, plurality, and ecumenism.¹⁴ The second type “interprets doctrine as noninformative or nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.”¹⁵ This type treats all religions as mere religious symbols of a common religious experiential core, yet such a unity in the diversity is held not by proof but by assumption.¹⁶ Instead, Lindbeck points out that religious language, far from being a mere surface symbol to be surmounted, is actually an irreducible *a priori* determinant of the experience’s intelligibility.¹⁷ In many ways, language constructs the experience.¹⁸ Thus, Lindbeck recommends the notion that doctrine functions as grammar, “communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.”¹⁹ Often misunderstood, Lindbeck does not mean that doctrine does not offer truth claims.²⁰ Thus, McClendon summarizes,

[Lindbeck] is not denying that Christian doctrines refer to God above and the world outside, but is (strongly) urging that what Christians have to say about God and world cannot be meaningfully separated from the network of rules and meanings that constitute Christian teaching;...what they teach cannot be plucked out of that network and judged apart from it any more than one could pluck out the eye of a living animal and test its vision apart from its organic membership in the animal. However we read Lindbeck, that is what needs to be said about Christian teaching as a whole: it makes sense in terms of its rules and not apart from them. It follows that Christian doctrine or teaching is not *merely* its rules any more than any other practice is not merely (or even “essentially”) a set of rules. (II, 31)

It is this notion of doctrine as grammar that McClendon adopts and expands.

¹⁴ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 79.

¹⁵ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

¹⁶ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 31–32.

¹⁷ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

¹⁸ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 37.

¹⁹ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

²⁰ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 19. Claims are especially first-order as they are done in the life of the church as opposed to a reflective discourse in the academy (see 68). Alister McGrath, among others, has offered this criticism of Lindbeck. See Alister McGrath, “An Evaluation of Evangelicalism and Postliberalism,” in *The Nature of Confession*, eds. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 23–44. However, this objection is rebutted in Jeffery Hensley, “Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists?” in *The Nature of Confession*, 79.

McClendon essentially adopts and expands Lindbeck's work in three general ways: (1) he claims the grammatical nature of doctrine for his baptist identity, then (2) he works through a theory of doctrine that is descriptive of Christian language-games, and finally, (3) he does the same for a theory of religion.

1. *The baptist Type and the Cultural-Linguistic Approach*: it seems that McClendon borrows the doctrinal typology that Lindbeck uses and applies it to his baptist notion of doctrine. At a more conceptual level, McClendon contrasts his doctrine with two other approaches: "Catholic" as well as "fundamentalist" propositionalist ones (the two being obviously different) and a "Protestant," liberal/experiential one.

Propositionalism, whether of a Catholic or fundamentalist sort, sees revelatory truth as given substantively in a propositional statement. The Catholic type sees certain dogmas, based on Scripture and tradition, as the deposit of revelatory truths recognized by a magisterium.²¹ Meanwhile, a fundamentalist type would see the statements of Scripture to be direct propositional material for timeless, scientifically and historically inerrant, literalistic truths.²² For McClendon, both have a rigidity to them that make them slow to adapt and revise themselves, often unable to admit fallibility, making for potentially authoritarian expressions (I, 25). Thus, while doctrines do make representational claims, they require a grammar to organize, evaluate, and revise them.

²¹ McClendon disapprovingly cites Karl Rahner on this count. For example see Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 381. However, Lindbeck cites Rahner as among the experiential-expressivists in *Nature of Doctrine*, 31. McClendon is offering his typology in obviously generalized terms.

²² McClendon does not deal with the "propositionalist" approach with much depth. Stanley J. Grenz, however, offers a detailed genealogy linking the Protestant scholasticism of Johann Quenstedt and Francis Turretin to the Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and Gresham Machen, who offered the intellectual backbone of the Fundamentalist movement that would later morph (with Carl Henry) into contemporary conservative evangelicalism. See Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 75–110. Grenz (with John R. Franke) argues that there are several flaws with propositionalist (in language) or foundationalist (in epistemology) notions of doctrine in *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 15. Grenz points out that propositionalist accounts of doctrine cannot properly take into account the contextual and fallible nature of doctrinal claims.

The second type is the experiential mode of doctrine characteristic of liberal Protestantism. As we have seen, McClendon does have a productive place for experience, but he does not treat experience in the tradition beginning with Schleiermacher, where doctrine became descriptive more of mental states of awareness and dependence, not necessarily knowledge of revealed truths (II, 26–27). While McClendon is appreciative of Schleiermacher, he finds the expressivist notion of doctrine inadequate for understanding all doctrinal utterances of the Christian community as a particular community. In contrast, McClendon sees doctrines as local and contextual, fallible and revisable. Doctrines do not merely express something that all religions can express. Doctrines are languages that have realistic references, but are irreducibly particular and meaningful within a community of regulative practice. This is something he particularly sees baptists epitomizing, as the Anabaptists especially were often immediately practical and communal with their doctrine (a description we have already offered in previous chapters). This claim and application of the cultural-linguistic theory to baptist identity is no doubt novel, and it seems bizarre that McClendon would claim the cultural-linguistic approach exclusively for baptists if that is indeed what he is doing.

2. *Doctrine*: McClendon offers his own account of doctrine as a practice governed by grammatical rules, and he shows how this practice allows for fallibility and revision. Christians live convictions that are persistent beliefs “such that if X (a person or a community) has a conviction, it will not be easily relinquished, and it cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before” (II, 29, quoting I, 23). While not all convictions are doctrinal, doctrinal theology seeks (as does McClendon’s second volume,

Doctrine, itself) “to enable churches to discover the convictions that inform their practices, and to facilitate their testing them for fidelity and truth” (II, 29).²³

The “games” and practices of baptist life are composed of participants, means, rules, and ends, and are embodied in baptist community in specific ways. These expand the account of *games* and *practices* that we have already offered in a previous chapter. (1) *Participants* in the doctrinal game involve not objective observers or involuntary converts, but teachers (with the correct spiritual gifts, cf. 1 Cor. 12–14) and learners as disciples (II, 29). (2) The *means* by which the Christian language-game is presented are statements of doctrine that reflect the genres of Scripture, so as to include not only cognitive statements but also narrative, parable, precepts, and proverbs (II, 30). The means in the offering of teaching from teacher to student involve qualifications of character and ability. (3) *Rules*, following Lindbeck,²⁴ are the given doctrines that a community uses to speak meaningfully in its theological discourses (doctrine as specific rules we will explore shortly). Not all convictions are grammatical rules (CW2, 143), as they can merely function to make truth claims. Also, “individual doctrines function on occasion as means, but constantly as rules” (II, 31). Doctrines are not merely their material element (as in Marxism, where material conditions determine life) nor purely theoretical (becoming almost dualistic in its separation from life: II, 32). Doctrines are practical, “since doctrines that express convictions actually *constitute* communal life” (II, 32). (4) The *ends* of this practice result in becoming Christ-like, following Christ as his disciple. At the end of the day, the theologian is no better than the “beggar or harlot, the prodigal or plodder...who turn to Christ Jesus in the hope of gaining

²³ See Holmer, *Grammar of Faith*. He states three ways theology is and is not analogous to grammar: (1) “If theology is like a grammar... then it follows that learning theology is not an end in itself,” as the point of grammar is speaking (19). This is something McClendon is well aware of. (2) Theology is like grammar in the sense that we do not make up the rules or set of criteria for good speech or true thought (20). (3) Theology offers explicit rules for playing “the whole game of God’s presence” (21–22). Yet, unlike grammar, theology is “the declaration of the essence of Christianity” (19).

²⁴ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

their *sight*” (II, 32). All people must become disciples. The final end of doctrine, then, is corporate, the redeemed humanity in Christ Jesus (II, 33). McClendon additionally offers a *caution* in doctrinal practice about its own fallibility.²⁵ He writes,

Practices are arenas of human excellence. They are as well foci of demonic and destructive energy. [...] I am thinking rather of the capacity possessed by teaching enterprises of the strictest biblical and experiential orthodoxy, impeccably evangelical, decorated with the fruits of long learning and much selfless devotion—a capacity to grind down upon those within their care and alienate or crush or shrivel them. This is not just the generic tendency of an institution to bureaucratize and institutionalize its personnel (that is another risk), but is the capacity of the practice of Christian teaching specifically to do in the name of truth what it warns against as a mark of error. Not every such mismove can be blocked in advance; it is enough for present purposes that we recognize the risk. (II, 33)

Confessing his own (hermeneutical) fallibility, McClendon states that he is not deluded with a “foolproof reading strategy” but merely seeks a “Christ-centered one; not a path from which none can possibly stray, but a trail plain enough to be followed by those who want to follow Jesus” (II, 468). It is this self-conscious fallibility (along with its practical and contextual awareness) that leads McClendon, as well as most baptist theology, to have a principled openness to revision:

As the Great Story that the Bible presents becomes (for Jesus’ followers) the Christian story, some practices (and hence some rules and laws) must change, but the reason is that Jesus sees where the story is going, and accordingly gives new direction to the way. [...] So there is a need for signals to the reader not to read the familiar commandments only in the light of what they had known of the story to this point. Rather, the reader must look for *a new sense of where the story is going*, and must find that sense in Jesus’ own way, which the reader is now summoned to live out afresh. (I, 225)

²⁵ See Michael Westmoreland-White, “Reading Scripture in the baptist Vision: James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and the Hermeneutics of Participation,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27 no. 1 (Spring 2000): 63–71. Westmoreland-White argues that the vision requires a more self-conscious hermeneutic of suspicion (69). While his objections may apply to more propositional forms of baptist doctrine, McClendon’s convictions of ongoing revision and fallibility here seem to render this objection as non-applicable to his theology.

This element is self-consciously implicit in McClendon's account of baptists, but prevalent in almost every loci of his doctrine. This is important to keep in mind in later chapters, as one tension in McClendon's thought (and perhaps a trait of baptist theology as a whole) is his attempt at historical descriptive accuracy, with forward thinking and prescriptive revision.

3. *Practical Theory of Religion*: McClendon also appropriates Lindbeck to offer a practical theory of religion, where the content of a religion is its powerful practices.²⁶ Early approaches to thinking about other religions tended to demonize them, while modern notions treated religions as all similar or argued that Christianity was the "final" religion in a process of general religious progress (II, 420–21). Instead, McClendon sees the essence of religions in their lived particularity, their powerful practices. While salvation might be outside of Christian faith, salvation is a concept particular to Christian faith and not some general category of religious achievement; talk of salvation outside Christian life is like talk of a "fire that gives no heat" (II, 422). This practical particularity ensures that all religions are not reduced to the same thing, nor do they have to be demonized for being completely unlike Christianity. Yet, since Christianity is practiced in the name of Christ, it is unique, calling for Christian mission. This exercise, however, is done out of "obedience not superiority" (II, 423). While he does not give a full theology of the nature of other religions, in this account, McClendon's intention is to hopefully

²⁶ For a survey of the major approaches to Christianity, salvation, and other world religions see Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). The four views in this book really are three, the last having two expressions: pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism. McClendon seems to assume an inclusive approach towards final salvation but refocuses the approach by taking an exclusive or particular approach with regards to practice. This still does not answer the question of the nature and purpose of other religions. Here McClendon is similar to Stanley Grenz, who could fill out this account; see Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, ch. 8. Grenz sees the practices of loving community in a religion as part of God's loving providence, and therefore, as a kind of practical prefigure of the ultimate eschatological community. The love of the present community as it seeks to be particularly faithful to Christ is the means of Christian witness to these other communities.

disarm modern inaccuracy and cultural arrogance, at the very least focusing Christian mission on obedience to Christ in any given context.²⁷

8.1.3 Grammatical Theology

Already we see that McClendon has appropriated the notion that doctrine is like both the grammar of a Wittgensteinian language-game and Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory. He has done so by linking it with his particular baptist identity that sees doctrine linked with ethics, but he has also shown a fuller description of the doctrinal language-game. We have seen this in the following: (1) rules governing biographical theology, (2) rules for typological reading (Chapter Three), (3) the three-strand account organizing ethical life (Chapter 4), (4) Christology (both two narrative Christology and the grammar of three governing concerns), (5) the grammar of the New Testament's experience of the Trinity (Chapter Five), (6) the mechanics of the remembering signs (Chapter Six), (7) the rules of picture-thinking in understanding eschatological imagery (Chapter Seven), and (8) the triune structure of biblical speech acts, organizing scriptural authority (in the next section of this chapter). We will not restate the rules again here, but rather, we will comment on how all the rules given throughout function as doctrinal grammar in the baptist vision.

1. *All doctrine and convictions can function as grammar.*²⁸ However, doctrine and convictions are not necessarily the same. Not all convictions Christians have are actually based

²⁷ Terrence Tilley expands this treatment, looking at Pascal and Montaigne. He argues that without understanding religion and religious epistemology as an embodied set of shared practices, religious division and fideism are insurmountable. See Tilley, "In Favour of a 'Practical Theory of Religion': Montaigne and Pascal," *Theology without Foundations*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 49–74.

²⁸ In fact, Joe Jones has offered a systematic theology where each doctrine's grammar is considered. This precise piece of theological reflection, as recommended by Hauerwas, stands with Robert Jenson and McClendon's work as the three greatest recent works of American systematic theology "signalling the recovery of the Christian voice in modernity" (as stated on the back cover). See Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

on doctrine and not all doctrines inform the life of faith.²⁹ Nevertheless, all theology is like grammar because it helps Christians speak intelligibly.

2. *Yet, grammar may also refer to the rules in which doctrines inhere.* McClendon attempts to offer the grammar of a doctrine in order to explain how all doctrines of that particular topic operate under certain common fundamental rules that make different expressions of that doctrine work in the Christian community. We might call this type of employment of grammar the “depth grammar” of certain doctrines.

For example, his rules for typological reading do not supply the interpretation but offers a set of criteria that govern the practice. In the case of his three-strand ethics, this grammar is the organizing structure of life. In the case of eschatology, his rules for picture-thinking show how eschatology in any form is intelligible (as opposed to irrational). His doctrines of the atonement, salvation, Trinity and Christology (his two-narrative Christology in particular) offer rules and dynamics, organizing the biblical data, which in turn offers an orienting structure for any doctrine on that topic. His grammar of liturgy offers insight into the implicit convictions that inform baptist worship. Doctrine grammar is offered for several reasons: organize biblical data, structure a set of doctrine, understand the conditions of intelligibility, properly revise a problematic conviction, offer a point of unity or commonality between a set of different doctrines, and to inquire into the implicit rules that govern a practice. Of course, the challenge here is that not all will agree on what these commonalities are. The grammatical approach is not the theological equivalent of structuralism. McClendon has offered his, but a Roman Catholic will see doctrines that conform to the decisions of its councils as grammatically correct. A liberal (despite Lindbeck’s particularistic emphasis) might still look for a common grammar across all

²⁹ For instance, a church might have a conviction about its building or an aesthetics that is important for its identity, but this conviction might not have any direct doctrinal foundation per se.

religions. A fundamentalist, it would seem, will assume a highly totalized set of doctrines as the grammar of genuine faith. Nevertheless, for any that grants the possibility of multiple ways to express a doctrine, grammar is a useful methodological and ecumenical tool.

3. *The baptist vision is a grammar for reading Scripture and the baptist vision is a precondition for grammar*: While it is not mentioned specifically as such, the baptist vision of “this is that” is a grammar by which the church reads, understands, and lives Scripture. We have stressed that McClendon follows a typological grammar that moves from the literal to the spiritual sense, situated in a local reading community. Much of this research project has been interested in the workings of this typological vision, we need not belabor the point here.

What is also important to remember, however, is that grammatical analysis is a function of the baptist vision. Because the biblical text is used by the Spirit to speak to today’s church, constituting the church in a way that the primitive church is the present church and the future church, there are practices that the church is living that follow a grammar. There would be no similar grammar for the *Iliad* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example. While the vision is a form of grammar, the vision also makes Christian grammar possible today.

Concerns: In this attempt to offer a grammatical account of doctrine, we (and others) see several areas of concern for improvement.

1. *Does offering a grammar of doctrine reduce theology to talk about talking about God, divorced from truth claims?* Francesca Murphy seems to think so and even thinks that doing so reduces God to language, which cannot answer the question as to the extra-linguistic truth of a statement.³⁰ Perhaps there is a danger that this might be the case, but Wittgenstein himself said,

³⁰ Francesca Murphy, *God is Not a Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36. Similar criticisms of postliberal theology are found in Mark I. Wallace, “The New Yale Theology: Liberalism, Realism, and the Problem of Truth,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 17.2 (December 1987): 154–70. Cf. Gary L. Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55.4 (Winter 1987): 687–717.

“Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language.”³¹ If McClendon merely offered a grammar of salvation as a notion that he had never personally lived, or that he thought was real, that would be to reduce God to language. Grammatical analysis does not solve any problem of the first-order life of faith and all its reality, but it is a good prerequisite and tool for understanding them. Grammar assumes a correspondence between language and reality embedded in a situation of practice that requires exploration and explanation. McClendon writes, “Our task is not only to clarify the grammar of faith but to furnish a tongue-tied world with language adequate to Christ’s presence in its midst” (II, 430). Thus, the analogy merely aids in focused reflection.

2. *Does a grammatical approach become fideist?* While this is a valid concern for other Wittgensteinians, McClendon was actually a critic of fideist engagements with Wittgenstein early in his own career. McClendon writes, after treating Wittgenstein’s followers such as D. Z. Phillips,³² that “while the Wittgensteinians are not explicit relativists, they appear to share the same dilemma of relativism: it implies a world in which we are hopelessly divided by high linguistic or conceptual walls from one another” (CV, 27). First, while McClendon, similar to Phillips, does not want theology legitimated and accommodated to philosophy, he does not uphold a strict, incommensurable separation of religious and non-religious language games. Phillips seeks a strict separation of theology and philosophy. Meanwhile, for McClendon, interaction between theology and other forms of thought is a possible language-game itself, a part of witness. Second, as we have seen, McClendon advises caution and fallibility, which are constitutive of the baptist grammar for its language games. Third, in building upon Austin’s

³¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I:112.

³² Phillips especially asserted the autonomy of the religious language game in a fideist manner in “Religious Belief and Language Games,” in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 121–42.

theory of speech-acts to think about religious language, he holds to the possibility that religious language is to some degree understandable and testable, within the correct process of inquiry and justification, by those within and outside of the forms of life the language-games are a part of.

3. *Does the practical orientation of doctrine focus too much on practice?* Sharing a worry similar to Murphy's, William Willimon, co-author of *Resident Aliens* (which was co-written with a close theological influence on McClendon, Stanley Hauerwas), has grown to object to the notion of Christianity being a "practice."³³ This, he argues, downplays the theological content of faith: theology refers to God, not to what we do. Willimon worries that practices such as the Sabbath can be practices regardless of the god worshiped on that day of rest.

Willimon's objections are understandable and well taken, but they do not seem to apply if "practice" is situated in the grammar of faith. First, the notion that Christianity is a set of practices is upheld in the baptist mode *because* of who God is and what God teaches. Faith in God is inseparable from obedience to him. Theology is biographical and ethical not because of an anthropological foundation, but because of the demands of the subject of theology: God's identity necessitates changed lives that reflect his character. McClendon points out that the priority of ethics is pedagogical, not logical to a theology of God (I, 41). While theology is a reflection done from within a set of practices that believers are immersed in, theology acts to reflect on God in order, when necessary, to correct certain practices. Second, Willimon speaks of "practices" as if divorced from a single, holistic way of life (particularly in his Sabbath analogy). Grammar indicates a complex social phenomenon, more so than merely doing an action. For instance, while other religions practice types of pacifism, this practice for Christians is set within the grammar of life relating to Christ. As we pointed out, Christian pacifism is only possible because of the anastatic reality of Christ's resurrection and cannot be separated from that.

³³ William Willimon, "Too Much Practice," *Christian Century* 127.5 (Mar. 9, 2010): 22–25.

Thus, seeing doctrine as grammar is a technical way of reflecting on the embodied convictions of the community of faith. McClendon sees grammatical reflection as making sense of how the “this is that” dynamic is lived in the midst of the community. Offering a grammar can mean a lot of things, and there are certainly ways to think about such grammar wrongly. Wittgensteinian philosophers have often been accused of fideism, but this is a worry McClendon shares and moves beyond.

8.2 Doctrine as Speech-Act

McClendon was one of the first theologians to work with J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory, and he applied it to various theological problems. In many ways this conceptual tool of language belongs first, but since it is tied to the points of the next chapter, it is placed here. McClendon applies the theory of speech-acts in several ways: to religious language, to how the Gospels identify their readers, to how theology is self-involving, and to how baptism functions as a performative sign—all applications offering more holistic understandings of what is being talked about. These points aid the baptist vision respectively in its commitment to a critical examination of convictions, to theology being done by believers, with one of the most pivotal of these convictions being believer’s baptism.

Austin offered a substantial corrective to the linguistic theories of logical positivism in showing that statements are not just propositions but that they are always doing something.³⁴ Sentences command, question, assert, etc. In Austin’s view (via McClendon), there are sentences that might not have any representational nature to them (CV, 59). Language often is not

³⁴ McClendon notes that his account of convictions only instrumentally re-appropriates Austin. He is not interested in being fully faithful to every nuance of Austin’s theories (CV, 47). Therefore, no comprehensive summary of Austin will be given here. However, for Austin’s primary work, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), especially 45–91. Also, Austin’s best-known successor is John Searle; see his “What Is a Speech Act?” in *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), and *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

descriptive but performative (CV, 60). In functioning so, language, far from merely passively rendering the world of facts, actually *enacts* facts (CV, 51).

McClendon appropriates this and gives an example of a game of baseball, pointing out that a speech-act has three aspects. (1) If a player says something, the fact that he has said something is a “sentential act.” (2) If the player calls, “time out,” he has enacted something with his words and therefore has done an “illocutionary act,” which McClendon simply calls a speech-act proper. (3) The effect of the speech-act, beyond the illocution, is the perlocutionary act. This entails everything from the sense of delight or displeasure other players may feel at his action, to the unintended increased sales at the concession stand (CV, 51). In all this, the three dimensions are dependent on each other: (3) on (2), (2) on (1). There can be (1) sentential acts that are not (2) speech-acts and speech-acts with no (3) perlocutionary results. But regardless, speech-acts remind language-users that “saying something is a way of *acting* meaningfully” (CV, 54, italics mine).

While there are many facets to this theory of language, the application of this is our present concern. McClendon applies speech-act theory to do the following: to resolve issues of fideism and propositionalism in a holistic account of religious language, then specifically to delineate the functions of the Gospels in the community, how theology is self-involving, and how baptism works.

1. *Understanding doctrine as speech-acts offers a holistic understanding of doctrine, which moves beyond fideism, skepticism, and relativism.* As we have already seen, baptists have a commitment to their convictions as being fallible and revisable. McClendon wants to steer clear from convictional imperialism (that one perspective can judge “objectively” all others) and convictional relativism (in which no outside perspective can judge another) (CV, 8). Rather,

McClendon intends to give an account of convictions that are fallible and testable, even as they take into account the full depth of the language that communicates a conviction.

This means, for McClendon, that disagreements in convictions are “in the short term inevitable” but in the long term, with the correct process involved, on principle “not invincible” (CV, 77). Secular reason and critical history can test biblical statements, but they do need to take into consideration all factors involved in a statement (such as the ones we explored in understanding the narrative knowledge of Christ in Chapter Five). Secular reason, McClendon points out, is just as indebted to convictions as religious rationality (CV, 183), and if it does not take into account different dimensions of religious belief, it will do a disingenuous job at assessing convictions.

McClendon continues on in the rest of the book, *Convictions* (which was co-authored with an atheist friend of his, James Smith), to offer an account of the ongoing processes by which convictions can be communicated to others outside of one’s community, and how they can be tested.³⁵ Accordingly, the co-authors outline a *justifiable* belief (a belief that *can* meet challenges), a *justified* belief (a belief that *has* met *some* challenges) and a *fully justified* belief (a belief that has met *every* possible challenge). Some convictions are held in a way that they have not been fully justified, but are nevertheless being held in the process of justification (CV, 83). Understanding the complexity of this undertaking means that one rarely assesses one conviction in isolation, but rather sets of convictions, with some functioning as operative (CV, 90). The intellectual virtue of a person or community embarking on such a justification process is a condition of the meaningfulness and “happiness” of those who utter such religious speech-acts.

³⁵ The problem of justification is a concern that many have offered against the validity of narrative theology. See Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 192. Goldberg sees three problems: the problem of truth (how is the text experienced as real), the question of meaning (how to interpret texts), and the question of rationality (how does this not fall into relativism).

In the process of justification and inter-convictional encounter, if a conviction is problematic, then it must be revised (or understood as in need of further justification: CV, 165). This can place the believer in a difficult spot of either rebelling due to the failure of that conviction and its community, or reforming it successfully into a better statement. Either way, theology thus framed is the science of convictions, Christian theoretics, and it is the process by which “the discovery, examination, and transformation of the conviction set of a given convictional community, carried on with a view to discovering and modifying the relation of member convictions to one another, to other (nonconvictional) beliefs held by the community and whatever else there is” (CV, 184).

One cannot overstate the importance of McClendon’s adoption of speech-act theory in religious epistemology. Here McClendon left modernity with its false confidence with a search for indubitable and foundationalist structures of human reason. Instead, this lead McClendon to the rooting of belief in a narrative community where the speech-acts of Christian convictions are situated. This does not mean, for McClendon, that Christian convictions are infallible, but rather they and the process by which they are justified are perspectival and situated.

2. *Gospels are speech-acts that identify Christ to the church, Christ in history, and readers as disciples.* Here McClendon talks about the speech-acts of the Gospels as having (1) primary force (identifying Christ), (2) representative force (historical aspects), and (3) emotive or affective elements. The first aspect, identifying, locates the primary force of the Gospel text, meaning that the Gospels identify Christ, telling stories to further display that identity. The Gospel of Mark, for instance, is an extended speech-act to the church to identify Christ. McClendon writes,

the Gospels (each viewed for present purposes as one extended speech-act) **are identifying** the one we call *Jesus Christ*. Now the speech-act of identifying, like the acts

of promoting, or assessing, or reporting, or any other possible speech-act, has its own proper conditions for felicity, aptness, or “happiness.” (I, 334–35, emphasizes his)

Understanding the Gospels as identifying speech-acts puts them on a slightly different level of intention than modern history, while still being sufficiently historical. “Note, though, that treating the Gospels as identity-documents gives them a literary aim quite different from thinking of them as (inept) attempts at modern historiography or biography” (I, 335).

This is because the Gospels seek to identify not merely the historical Jesus, but also the resurrected presence of Christ in the midst of the church. Thus, a part of this function of identifying is the speech-act of identifying the readers as disciples, as they are confronted by the risen Christ, who is identified by the narrative also. McClendon notes

a vital feature of the Gospels understood as identity-documents: whereas the identity of Jesus is at once that of the risen Christ present in the readers’ church and the central figure in the gospel, the identity of the “disciples” is by invitation the readers themselves as well as their originals in the story. We are invited to become disciples, and thus to see ourselves figuring in this narrative. (I, 336)

Thus, by understanding the whole speech-act of the Gospel narrative, the complex intention of the text is not a scandal to be overcome but an element of depth to embrace.

The second aspect of this envisioning of the Gospels as speech-acts is the representative force of the Gospels in relating their statements to history. As a speech-act, a given Gospel does assert a historical occurrence (which we will revisit next chapter). This does not mean that the representative force of the text is reducible to a critical history behind it or that all of its historical statements can in fact be verified (nor must they, in order for them to be trusted: II, 338). However, the text does have a basic commitment to historicity, but this history is reliable, not infallible (II, 337, 339). Some of the statements in the Gospels could be literary in nature, but these “literary devices stand in just that relation to what happened that is required to make them

genuine identity-documents” (II, 338). While the meaning of the narrative is determined from within the narrative itself, this does not prevent genuine historical inquiry (II, 338).

The third aspect is the emotive quality of the Gospels’ speech-acts. McClendon has already noted that a Gospel produces a sense that its reader exists in its figures (I, 336). So, this dimension is cognizant of the affective qualities of how the text is received.³⁶ As believers have attested, reading Scripture has produced joy, regret (at sin), resolve, love, delight, reverence, hope, etc. (II, 342). These states change the reader from merely seeing propositions on the page about a distant historical figure, to apprehending God’s Word communicated to the church today.

Thus, in *Doctrine*, it seems that the baptist pattern of authority takes up this three-fold structure, even if it is not explicitly stated to be a speech-act. Theology is done in the love of the Father, the word of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit. McClendon calls this the interactive, redemptive, and unitive authority (each corresponding respectively to each person of the Trinity: II, 458). This loosely follows the pattern of sentential act (that God is a revealer who has spoken) and the speech-act itself (Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh), spoken so as to create different conditions of reception (the work of the Holy Spirit in the communities’ worship, work, and witness). Understanding the biblical text as a speech-act of God helps to overcome modernistic worries that every passage must be proven history, while still keeping the reliability of the text in view, and, more importantly, the primary purpose of the text, which is being the text by which and through which the Spirit speaks today.

To further integrate, the power of the speech act to identify believers, drawing them into the biblical narrative, situating them in the triune structure of speech-acts, is the mean by which the figures of Scripture are impressed in a believer’s story. Thus, the truth of Scripture, as we

³⁶ Richard Steele argues that McClendon accounts for and surpasses the experiential-expressive notion of language in “Narrative Theology and Religious Affections,” in *Theology without Foundations*, 163–79.

saw in Chapter Two, is displayed in the living out of Scriptures images, which biographical theology identifies and reflects on. These figures and images are substance of the doctrines of creation, salvation, eschatology, Christology, etc. that we seen in dealing with catachresis, picture thinking, and the other tools the baptist vision uses to allow “this” to be “that.”

3. *Theology as speech-acts means theology is for believers.* Following point two above, theology is a second-order discourse that is done to equip believers in the first-order work of relating to God. Speech-acts form a theory of understanding the lived dimension of Christianity: God speaking to the church, the church speaking to God in prayer, and/or the church speaking to the world. Thus, in the essay, “Homo Loquens,” McClendon was prudent to begin by discussing language-games (as we did in the previous section), but continued on to discussing Austin, and finally ending in mission, worship, and prayer (CW2, 136–39). Thus, listening to and obeying God as well as responding in prayer are the speech-acts that form the primary sites of theological meaning. Theology then is only done by those who are walking with the true subject of theology: Christ.

4. *As a specific application of speech-acts, McClendon looks at baptism as a performative sign,* attempting to understand the action in all its complexities. McClendon had been thinking about the nature of baptism since early in his career (see the essay, “Baptism as Performative Sign” in CW1, 71–84). On this matter, McClendon’s mature thought did not stray that far from the thinking he offered earlier.

McClendon is skeptical about how many of the terms used for baptism can actually get at the mechanics of how baptism works (II, 388). By understanding it as a speech-act, he thinks some clarification can be offered. Baptism, as he constantly maintained, is a performative sign, a remembering sign that re-enacts the historic signs of redemption, particularly Christ’s death,

burial, and resurrection, as one resolves to follow Christ. There are other terms (symbol, sacrament, mystery) that McClendon finds acceptable, but he sees “sign” to be the most descriptively helpful and faithful to his baptist sensibilities (which we sketched out in Chapter Six).

To understand baptism through speech-acts is to understand God as acting in baptism through word-events. It is a “triply enacted sign” (II, 390). Baptism is a speech-act of God to the participant, showing that they are now forgiven. This solidifies forgiveness, but this does not mean that if disciples die without being baptized, they are not saved (II, 389). Baptism is a speech-act performed by the church to the individual, as the church performs in the authority of the triune name, committing to be a community faithful to the individual. The individual faithful responds, pledging himself or herself to obedience (II, 389). The speech-act brings the person’s story through the church into God’s story. Baptism, then, is a speech-act on the part of the one baptized to take up the story of the cross as his or her own, commissioned and ordained here (II, 391).³⁷ Thus, a sacramentalism that allows for involuntary, immature, or inauthentic converts receiving grace without true repentance or discipleship cannot complete the speech-act (CW1, 81). Baptism is thus a sign of what has already happened in repentance and a sign for what the believer will continue to do.³⁸ Through speech-acts (of God, church, and individual) the performative sign of baptism is understood in a more helpful way, as something that God speaks into the individual, that the church does under the authority of the triune name, and that the

³⁷ We should note that there are baptist sacramentalists that have offered similar discipleship-minded expressions of the doctrine. See Stanley K. Fowler, *More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought 2; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

³⁸ If we look to the *mikveh* rituals of Judaism as the precursor to baptism, we see further evidence of it being a performative sign for obedient disciples. Mikveh rituals were washing for priestly vocation and bodily cleansing. John, Jesus and the early church re-appropriated this cleansing image for calling the people of God to renewed, priestly vocation and to cleanse them of their sin. The commitment to stop sinning, coupled with the sense of water cleansing, explains the high sacramental rhetoric where baptism is for “the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). For full explanation of this, see William H. Jones, *Jewish Ritual Washing and Christian Baptism* (Toronto: ChiRho Communications, 2010).

individual does, binding himself or herself to Christ's story of the cross and resurrection.³⁹ The baptist namesake is baptism, thus implying a commitment to its significance, not merely being an ineffectual symbol, yet baptists have been wary of making it *too* important, as to seem to cause salvation without obedience. Understanding it as a performative sign helps to make sense of this complexity.

Other Applications: Since any statement of faith could be analyzed as a speech-act, the speech-act theory can have a wide application. Here we will discuss two, both in regards to Scripture. These are the ideas put forward by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Stanley Grenz.

1. *Wolterstorff on Divine Discourse:* While McClendon certainly understands Scripture to be the Word of God, he does not offer much of a doctrine of Scripture nor does he apply speech-act theory to the notion of God's Word directly (he does so implicitly in his chapter on authority). He does also treat the identifying function of the Gospels, but that is much more specific. Wolterstorff, on the other hand, offers a speech-act analysis of the Scriptures in order to show how God speaks through them.

Wolterstorff offers two notions of agency in how the Scriptures bring about God's Word, which is helpful. Scripture itself is a "double discourse."⁴⁰ God speaks using human words. This, in turn, is done in two ways. One is deputized speech, where a prophet is authorized to speak on behalf of God, bringing a message to the people.⁴¹ The second is "appropriated discourse,"

³⁹ This is the general argument of the classic exegetical defense of believer's baptism by G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). McClendon cites this study often.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38–42.

⁴¹ For a full description of this see Walter Houston, "What Did the Prophets Think They Were Saying? Speech Acts and Prophetic Discourse in the Old Testament," *Biblical Interpretation* 1.2 (1993): 167–88. Houston goes further to point out that the prophets were aware at times of God speaking through them. Moreover, these statements of judgment, far from merely *expecting* judgment, were actually speech-acts of ruling, invoking a new state of affairs in the people.

where the Holy Spirit speaks by appropriating the words of a biblical author.⁴² Here is an adequate way of understanding the humanness of the biblical text but also its divinity in a way that very much coincides with McClendon's thoughts, whether speech-acts, two-narrative Christology, or general objections to biblical inerrancy. "The story the Bible tells is God's own story, told in the way God pleases to tell it" (II, 476). God is pleased to speak through his prophets and through the books of the Bible.⁴³

2. *Grenz and the Action of the Spirit*: Stanley Grenz took up Wolterstorff only to disagree with some of what he was insisting on. Grenz critiqued him for locating meaning in the biblical text too close to the biblical (human) author.⁴⁴ The final authority and final author of the Bible is the Spirit, who does speak beyond the historical circumstances of the human authors in powerful and mysterious ways. "The text has its own intention, which has its genesis in the author's intentions but is not exhausted by it."⁴⁵ The Spirit keeps speaking anew in new places for the present church. Similar (though not the same) to McClendon's view, for Grenz the perlocutionary act of the Spirit in this is speaking the gospel, which brings forth a redeemed world, the kingdom of God.⁴⁶

⁴² Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 42–54.

⁴³ Wolterstorff fears that if authorial intent is abandoned, Scripture will become a wax-nose. However, Brevard Childs argues that the Scriptures are to be interpreted through the canonical action of the church, which contains the rule of faith. This should guide the interpretive process, the same one that brought the biblical canon together. See Brevard Childs, "Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58.4 (2005): 375–92. While the Rule of Faith and other employments of tradition will be discussed in a separate chapter, Nancey Murphy argues that the biblical text as a speech-act does have determinate meaning that will prevent, to an extent, an unstable and relativist understanding of meaning in the text. See Murphy, "Textual Relativism, Philosophy of Language, and the baptist Vision," in *Theology without Foundations*, 259–63.

⁴⁴ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74. Two other prominent evangelical authors that have also equated the meaning of the text with its human authors are Francis Watson and Kevin Vanhoozer. See Watson, *Text and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). Yet there seem to be multiple texts in the New Testament that quote the same Old Testament text in two different ways, showing that the text does speak beyond the human intention since the text is appropriated in two distinct ways. For examples, see the list in James D. G. Dunn, *The Unity and Diversity of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 105.

⁴⁵ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74.

⁴⁶ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 75.

The concept of the speech-act has many applications. It is first a general concept that language does something. Applied to doctrine, it does not necessarily change the doctrine so much as equip the theologian to be more attentive to the holistic nature of doctrinal speech. Since God is a God who speaks, speech-act theory provides a philosophical tool that is compatible to the biblical text.

8.3 Conclusion

McClendon has used two models, or analogies, to understand doctrine in the baptist vision: grammar and speech-acts. Doctrine is like the grammar of a language, the rules of which govern meaning. This allows the truth of the text and the experience of the believer to be organized in the baptist vision. Doctrine is also to be understood as a speech-act, not merely a context-less proposition. Also, doctrine is like a creative, interpretive reading of a text, given at a particular time to grapple with the logic of a text or topic. This displays the proclivity of the baptist vision to speak “this is that” in a new and powerful way. Each is helpful in its own way, while they all have their own limitations. More importantly, each further equips the reader for comprehending and living out the baptist vision.

Chapter 9: Did It Happen?

From all this it followed that I was not obliged to agree with these writers in all that they had written, or to look upon them as infallible guides. It did not follow that therefore I ought to throw the Bible away, and I am thankful that that foolish suggestion so often supposed to attend upon such discoveries did not occur to me. But it did follow that I was not required to accept all statements in the Bible as true and all views that it contained as correct.

Apparently I was a free reader, not a reader upon whom assent was obligatory...

...in my present attitude the existence of open questions does not distress me, and I have no fear that the question outstanding will be settled in such a manner as to destroy the value of the Bible. My confidence in it rests on a securer basis. The ground of confidence is this: It is certain that the Bible gives us knowledge of Jesus, and that Jesus gives us knowledge of God, and that God as Jesus reveals him in the true light of life.

- William Newton Clarke¹

These two quotations are from the memoirs of William Newton Clarke, reflecting over his 60 years spent studying the Bible from childhood, to seminary, to pastoring, to being a professor. Doubt about the historicity of the Bible occupied his mind until he opened himself up to the notion that Scripture was primarily intended to witness to Christ and the work of the Spirit. One of the greatest questions of narrative theology has been whether it takes historicity seriously. There is a pervasive concern that a focus on narrative undermines historical references and questions of historicity. For instance, Robert Cathey reports,

Postliberal theology was called to task for its account of Christian truth-claims under the issues of reference and rationality. Were second wave postliberal accounts of the justification of faith in God any less circular and question-begging than so-called neo-orthodox appeals to special revelation? Didn't the privileged postliberal categories like narrative, community, identity, character, and tradition become inflated with meanings that simply ignored issues of historical-critical scholarship, academic freedom, the segmentation of life in secular societies, and the renewed influence of science, technology, and global capitalism in every sector of life? At bottom, were not postliberals subject to a fideism, relativism, and sectarianism inspired by Wittgenstein's oversimplified accounts of language-games and forms of life? Finally, was it accidental that these neo-liberal charges of fideism, relativism, and tribalism came in the midst of the resurgence of Islam on the field of politics and debates over multi-cultural curricula in public and theological education?²

¹ William Newton Clarke, *60 Years with the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 107, 252-53.

² Robert Andrew Cathey, *God in Postliberal Perspective* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 10. Also, well summarized in Thomas Finger, "What is Narrative Theology?" *Christianity Today* (Oct 7, 1983), 84, and in Alister McGrath, "The Biography of God," *Christianity Today* (Jul. 22, 1991), 22-24.

Moreover, one of the greatest sources of strife in Baptist circles is over the reliability of the Bible's history. McClendon addresses these questions with his vision. While we have explored these problems in part in previous chapters, we will discuss them fully here. There seem to be two modes of reference in McClendon's thought regarding the Bible's claim to reality. One is historical; the other is pneumatic; both are presented through narrative. In understanding both, we will see that McClendon has offered an authentic albeit generalized account of how Scripture refers to the past and speaks to the present in the baptist vision.

While McClendon does not explicitly refer to two modes as such, we shall observe two ways McClendon thinks about the text. We will first look at the degree of reliability of the Bible's historical references as an important concern for McClendon. He accepts a fair degree of historical-critical insight as well, yet is able to move on from there. So, how McClendon holds his concerns together is by no means straightforward. This entails understanding McClendon's use of Hans Frei and especially Frei's notion of how a narrative can be both "history-like" and "realistic." As we will see, this gradually shifts to the second mode, which suggests that Scripture's meaningfulness, while dependent on some degree of historical reliability, is not reduced to references to the past. It is used by the Spirit to address the church, which is called to listen and interpret this present speech well.

We should also note at this point that this chapter is bringing together for general discussion what we have already discussed in others. In Chapter Three, we discussed the doctrine of Scripture and how McClendon's baptist vision moves beyond the pitfalls of some versions of biblical inerrancy. In Chapter Four, we noted that McClendon understands the structure of the narrative itself to have a kind of ontological quality to it, offering real depictions of God's identity and real paradigms for believers to emulate. Chapter Five looked at the complexity of

the composition of the Gospels, understanding that the Apostles wrote them with a discursive aim very different from a positivistic notion of history. Also in Chapter Eight we began to discuss speech-act theory as a general tool for thinking about doctrinal statements. We touched on its capacity to understand further utterances from Scripture there, but that discussion will be taken up in a fuller way here.

9.1 History, History-Like, and Unlikely History

While McClendon maintains that historicity is important for the Bible, it cannot be maintained that Scripture is a pristine piece of historical documentation the way modern assumptions would expect; but this fact does not detract from its authority and meaningfulness. McClendon uses the terms “realistic” and “history-like” with reference to narrative, and he advocates for reading “literally,” borrowing from the work of Hans Frei, but these descriptors have more than one meaning in McClendon’s writings. This makes McClendon’s proposal regarding historicity complex. The following points will attempt to parse what McClendon means.

1. *The Bible is, for McClendon, historically reliable.* The narrative reflects “actual events with considerable (though not absolute) accuracy.”³ The difference between “considerable” and “absolute” might mean simply that while there are historical errors, the Bible has enough historicity to it in order to trust its essential message. (What is and is not “essential” is not supplied by the Bible itself, but only discerned by a faithful community.) Nevertheless, the Bible cannot be purely fictional nor can it be reduced to an allegory of something else. Its major claims intend on being historical: “The story you are living out now *is* the story related to the text. History is real, *history matters*, exactly because in God’s mysterious ways the past is present” (II, 466). As McClendon states further in *Witness*,

³ Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 132.

Christian theology has a big stake in the historicity of what it professes. It will not do to say of the exodus from Egypt, or of the proclamation of the prophets, or of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, or (center of it all) of his resurrection from the dead, that these are only edifying tales; think on them and be edified. For a fictional past yields at best a fictional God, not a God who is GOD. (III, 351)

Thus, the narrative often requires its statements to be historical and the believer is right to assume and expect it.

Central to this requirement, of course, are the major events of the Gospels. As it especially pertains to the Gospels, “Their linguistic role as identity-documents requires that they shall be veridical, factual, actual history as well” (I, 338). So, McClendon wants to affirm the general reliability of the central events of the Bible. The question becomes, then, what kind of history? How much historicity?

2. *Modernity, whether taken up by conservatives or liberals, has often worked with inauthentic notions of historicity.* Modern views of history and reference assume a highly positivistic perspective⁴ where facts could be stated in narratives in highly objective ways, eliminating the author’s subjectivity, cultural condition, literary crafting, while expecting history with high degrees of precision. McClendon (in agreement with Frei) sees a kind of misstep in theology when the Bible was no longer seen as meaningful in itself, subsumed into evaluative frameworks of ostensive references, whether judged affirmatively (conservatism) or critically (liberalism).⁵ One affirms a literalism (for lack of a better term) that forced Scripture to be true only insofar as its historical references are perfectly accurate (“inerrancy or the abyss!” as the

⁴ Positivism is a description corresponding to a movement in twentieth-century philosophy that evaluated the meaningfulness of language in terms of its empirical correspondence, whether its verification or falsification. For instance, see Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” *Mind*, 14/56 (October, 1905), 479-493; A. J. Ayer, *Truth, Language, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952); Anthony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955): 109-130. While Russell and Flew were more influential, Ayer perhaps offers the most succinct summary: “The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as being false” (35). Ayer, therefore, saw religious, ethical, and emotive statements as either less meaningful, suspect, or outright meaningless (see pages 107–18).

⁵ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 5, 92.

fundamentalists insisted); the other silences the Bible with historicism.⁶ McClendon writes, summarizing Frei,

Enlightenment biblical scholars gave up the centuries-old idea that the biblical narratives meant what they said, and substituted for that (once obvious) notion of meaning another—the reconstructed “scientific history” to which the narratives were said to refer—or failing that, some other more ingenious “meaning” located beneath the surface of the text, a “spiritual” sense, or a “religious” meaning, or a Christ-myth, or whatever. (I, 334)

As McClendon sees it, this shift in understanding scriptural reference essentially caused two similar but problematic ways of reading Scripture: “(at one extreme) the Bible remains a cold icon, relegated to symbolic significance or [...] (at the other) it is made a graven idol, a ‘paper pope,’ receiving more homage the more it is misread” (II, 35).

Thus, McClendon tries to offer a chastened account of the historical reliability and meaning of Scripture. McClendon maintains, “there are neither value-free facts nor fact-free values” (I, 344). Thus, “story is in fact essential to history” (III, 351). Historicity never escapes subjectivity, nor does the Bible appear free from the culture that produced it. While there is an expectation of historicity, there is also the realization that the Bible was written using different discourses, like oral tradition and origin stories, to communicate what is assumed to be history or merely appears “history-like” (a term we will define shortly). Its history is meaningful as it intersects with the present:

History that is more than chronology and necrology appears only when it is viewed with the eyes like Jesus’ eyes, eyes that can see how this is that, how storied past and prophetic future converge upon this present. No wonder this became the apostolic strategy in reading Scripture. Must it not also have been Jesus’ own hermeneutic, passed along to his inner circle...? (CW1, 132)

⁶ Ricoeur defines historicism as “the epistemological presupposition that the content of literary works and in general of cultural documents receives its intelligibility from its connection to the social conditions of the community that produced it or to which it was destined. To explain a text then means primarily to consider it as the expression of certain socio-cultural needs and as a response to certain socio-cultural needs and as a response to certain perplexities well localized in space and time.” Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 90.

We will develop further what this means below, but essentially this means that the Bible, as an ancient document written in a different set of discourses than what modernity expects and as a document used by the Spirit to speak, has a different way of making references.

3. *Historicity is often taken on faith and often unverifiable.* McClendon writes, “Notice that this is not quite the same as the related insistence that some or all of these stories shall be available to and verifiable by public historical investigation” (I, 338). Some events in Scripture are simply beyond our power to investigate archeologically. McClendon continues,

Moreover, there are within the Gospels identity-claims, such as the claim that Jesus is the one who is totally obedient to God, which are beyond the reach of any possible historical investigation. So in Frei’s view, the position seems to be this: the truthfulness of this story in the synoptics is achieved by a variety of means, from the “stylized” episodes of the early kingdom teaching to the history-like identification of the intentions and actions of Jesus by way of personal narrative about him at the Jerusalem terminus of his public career. *And these varied literary devices stand in just that relation to what actually happened that is required to make them genuine identity-documents.* Historical investigation of a public sort cannot in all the cases just cited (to say nothing of still others, such as the birth and infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke) be a court of last appeal as to their truth, for the reasons just explained, but where it is relevant to investigate historically, it is fitting to do so, provided this is understood to be a separate historical inquiry and not a substitute for investigating the meaning of the narratives themselves. (I, 338, italics his)

Belief in the resurrection is not, for instance, firstly based on an empirical exercise in order to come to belief (although some have done so this way).⁷ Many Christians are encountered with the risen Christ, who convicts them of the resurrection apart from any scholarly investigation of it (II, 245). For many in the church, Christ is known apart from historical investigation, known through the worship, work, and witness by which Christ is present to them.

4. *Nevertheless, this does not mean historical references, taken on faith, are infallible.* As historical-critical investigation has found, the historicity of the biblical text is far more complex

⁷ While there are many biblical scholars that take this approach, the most recognized example would be Pannenberg. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968). However, McClendon does not take their approach.

than the assertion that all stories in the Bible happened as reported. Does a realistic reading ignore all historical-critical findings (many of which come from honest attempts to reconcile all the data found in Scripture itself)? Do these findings dismiss Scripture? Under the weight of such findings, many are tempted to lose faith in Scripture's truth claims and revelatory character, or to reject the value of a historical approach entirely. McClendon encourages neither, and in fact encourages that a historical-critical approach be taken seriously. As we may recall, the Bible is to be read Christocentrically, but may be read using other means as long as it does not contradict the first two rules concerning Christological and canonical unity (II, 38). Thus McClendon writes,

Historical critical scholarship has come, and we can no more return to the mental attitude of the prior era than we can abolish the European discovery of America.... Hans Frei's broad cultural comment on the historical-critical displacement of biblical narrative should certainly not be taken as disparagement of the real gains of that scholarship.... Archeology, comparative linguistics, culture history, comparative literature, semantics and syntactics, hermeneutics and the field-encompassing field of history have contributed irreversibly to the intelligibility of the Bible.... In many fields, biblical scholars have set the pace for other historians. There is a drive to truth and truthfulness in Christianity that has enabled, even required, such investigation, and all are indebted to it. (II, 465)

Thus, it should be asserted that historical research, within certain limitations, can investigate claims, and in some cases, these claims have been shown to be problematic. McClendon writes,

Public historiography, if not biased against Christianity by its very presuppositions (as, sadly, modern historiographic theories have been) could *in principle* defeat the Gospel identification by challenging its descriptions, though in fact none has decisively done so (Meyer, 1979). On this view, faith is not immune to history. (I, 339)

Thus, for instance, McClendon has no problem seeing Genesis as containing mythological material characteristic of its day. Concerning Genesis, he writes,

By now it is recognized in almost every church that the early chapters of Genesis did not fall as so many golden pages from heaven, but were from the beginning closely connected

with the wider cosmological thought of the ancient Near East. [...] By these [myths]...ancient peoples answered their urgent questions and shaped a life together. [...] [T]he creation accounts we find in Genesis 1–3 are written to repudiate the mythic account of the world, whether in Mesopotamian or Canaanite form. (II, 152–53)

We have explored McClendon's revision to his doctrine of sin with a non-historical Adam in view. While Scripture seems to assume a historical Adam, McClendon does not see the truth of Genesis 1–3, or the doctrine of sin, bound to that flawed historical assertion. Instead, as we saw in Chapters Three and Five, McClendon offers his own narrative and figural revisions. Meanwhile, he seems to affirm that the Exodus did historically happen (III, 351), and he also affirms that the documentary hypothesis (however defined and ascertained)⁸ is true (II, 466), which contradicts more simplistic understandings of authorship and tradition. There are currently lively debates over the degree of historicity Scripture has, over differences in authorship and times of writing—all of which we need not summarize here.⁹ In McClendon's estimate, there is a place for historical criticism as Christianity is not bound to all the historical assertions of the Bible, nor is faith immune from thoughtful criticism.

5. *The Bible is read "realistically," regardless of historical-critical suggestions.* Yet we must note that for McClendon, "realistic" narrative has several meanings. The first meaning comes from Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, which McClendon cites approvingly. The opening statements of Frei's read as follows:

Western Christian reading of the Bible in the days before the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century was usually strongly realistic, i.e. at once literal and historical, and not only doctrinal or edifying. The words and sentences meant what they said, and because they did so they accurately described real events and real truths. Other ways of reading portions of the Bible, for example, in a spiritual or allegorical sense, were permissible, but they must not offend against a literal reading of those parts which seemed most obviously

⁸ See the overview of the history and developments of source criticism in Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), ch. 9.

⁹ For example, see Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). However, see also defenses of proportionate reliability in Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

to demand it. Most eminent among them were all those stories which together went into the making of a single storied or historical sequence.¹⁰

Realistic narrative, in this sense, means both that it is literal and historical, the terms being fairly interchangeable in this context. McClendon concurs when he says,

[T]he main course of Christian Bible reading has held true over the centuries to the **plain sense** of Scripture—its stories were read as (in the main) real stories about real people; its history, real history; its declarations about God and God’s creatures as saying what they meant and meaning what they said. The Bible was not a code or cipher to be cracked; it was not a book of secrets; it was realistic; it spoke plain. (II, 36, boldface emphases in original)

But what does this mean when it seems likely that a passage’s history is not as accurate as it asserts? Frei often gives the impression that one is to merely disregard historical criticism and pretend the passage actually happened.¹¹ However, both McClendon and Frei are more complex than that.

The second understanding of realistic narrative means that the meaning of the passage is ascertained through the whole narration itself.¹² It is helpful at this point to quote Frei at length:

Literal depiction constitutes and does not merely illustrate or point to the meaning of the narrative and theme it cumulatively renders; and simultaneously it depicts and renders the reality (if any) of what it talks about. A realistic story is not necessarily history; but the difference between the two is that of reference or lack of reference, and not that of a different kind of account being appropriate in each case. On the contrary, in respect of descriptive or depictive form, history and realistic story are identical. This coherence between narrative depiction and the reality rendered by it allows a shift in emphasis from depiction or story form to the reality depicted, without a disruption of the conviction that the narrative tissue is what they have inseparably in common.¹³

¹⁰ Frei, *Eclipse*, 1.

¹¹ For a full description of referentiality in Frei, see Jason Springs, *Toward Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 85–104.

¹² For a similar view, see Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

¹³ Frei, *Eclipse*, 27–28. Clark Pinnock offers a similar account, that “there are things in the Bible that are history-like but not likely to be historical,” in *Tracking the Maze* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 161.

Thus, for Frei, as well as for McClendon, a realistic story also means that a narrative does not lose its value merely because its history is contested. Frei later wrote,

[W]hether or not the Gospels stories report history (either reliably or unreliably), whether or not the Gospels are other things besides realistic stories, what they tell us is a fruit of the stories themselves. We cannot have what they are about (the “subject matter”) without the stories themselves. They are history-like precisely because like history-writing and the traditional novel and unlike myths and allegories they literally mean what they say. There is no gap between the representation and what is represented by it.

Now it is important to note that since the beginning of the eighteenth century, and at an accelerating pace with the development of historical-criticism, this coincidence of the story’s literal or realistic depiction with its meaning has been taken to be the same thing as the claim that the depiction is an accurate report of actual historical facts.¹⁴

Frei’s description still sounds vague, but Lindbeck wrote more clearly when he said,

We now can make a distinction (unavailable before the development of modern science and historical studies) between realistic narrative and historical or scientific descriptions. The Bible is often “history-like” even when it is not “likely history.” It can therefore be taken seriously in the first respect as a delineator of the character of the divine and human agents, even when its history or science is challenged. As parables such as that of the prodigal son remind us, the rendering of God’s character is not in every instance logically dependent on the facticity of the story.¹⁵

As we have already delineated in Chapter Four, as a narrative portrays character, social setting, and incident, it offers a correspondingly ontological picture (I, 329). As McClendon notes, this does not mean that archeology, historical criticism, linguistics, or comparative studies cannot be used (II, 465), but rather, they are situated as secondary to the narrated identity (II, 38).

However, there is a third sense for McClendon, connected with the second, which is that a realistic narrative offers a *realistic ethic* to the reader through its narrative elements. McClendon writes,

¹⁴ Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 59–60.

¹⁵ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 122.

Consequently, the present volume's analysis of the shared moral life into three spheres or strands that are necessarily and indissolubly one is just matched by the literary critics' three necessarily interrelated strands or elements of realistic narrative. (I, 330)

Thus for McClendon, a realistic story is meaning rendered through the narrative itself, as Frei and Lindbeck stated, but it also has a realistic rendering for the ethical life of the reader. As character, social setting, and incident correspond to bodily, social, and anastatic spheres of the ethical life, so a narrative is realistic for McClendon. "Real" in this sense seems like a narrative picture that offers ontological-ethical plausibility, bearing on the life of the reader, reshaping them. A historical reference might be in doubt, but the narrative as a picture of God's character and example for believers to follow is still possible for many passages. The question then is, how does one know which passages can be taken this way, or which cannot?

The fourth sense is that a narrative is realistic as it speaks as one narrative to the present community that discerns its significance.¹⁶ This is only possible under the assumption that the God of the Bible is not completely a literary construct, and thus is sufficiently historical despite some passages being questioned (III, 351). As already stated, "these varied literary devices stand in just that relation to what actually happened that is required to make them genuine identity-documents" (I, 338). For McClendon, this entails the resurrection being historical: that the God of the Old Testament was fulfilled in the life of Christ and that the life of Christ culminated in the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, by which the Apostles reflected further upon Christ's identity.

Jesus was in the business not of denying but making history, and in order to do that he had to create a new sense of history. The Gospels show us Jesus did this by drawing upon the great formative scriptural images, applying them to himself to divine his role in the

¹⁶ This is similar (although not the same) as Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, edited by Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford, 1986): 36–77. Also see, Kathryn E. Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, edited by Garrett Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987): 59–78.

unfolding story. He was the Anointed One, the Son of David whose kingdom would have no end. (CW1, 132)

Thus, God has claimed the Scriptures, even those with unreliable historicity, embodied them figurally in Christ as something that identifies him, and uses the Scriptures to speak to the church.

Christians believe that God, the Spirit who “spoke by the prophets,” that is, inspired the Scriptures, **continues to** constitute the inner life of the church through the ages, so that Bible and church compose one story, one reality. There is a strong link between **the plain sense of Scripture** and the church’s self-understanding as a **continuation** of the biblical story. (II, 44, boldface emphases his)

McClendon sees this narrative dimension within the literal sense as the “spiritual sense” or the “theological sense”:

Yet plainness did not imply triviality, for as well as (or better, within) the plain sense there was what we might today call the *point* of that plain sense. And this point was often spoken of as another sense...called the **spiritual sense** of the text.... Spiritual sense meant, not an abandonment of discarding of the plain sense, but its appropriation into the whole story of divine and human relations; it meant the way the plain words bore upon readers’ lives in relation to all that God had done and would do in their regard. (II, 36, boldface emphases and italics his)

How each Scripture speaks of God’s character and speaks to the church is discerned in a process of communal discernment, which the Anabaptist insistence on communal interpretation offers (CW1, 125). McClendon holds to a community of readership where all interpretations are weighed and discerned, following 1 Cor. 14:26–29, where the community is called to deliberate on the statements of a prophet. Thus, any interpretation, including traditionally accepted readings, historical-critical insights, new applications, etc., has to be weighted and reflected upon by the community to understand their significance to the life of faith. This moves from thinking about the Bible’s truth in its historical references to its present use by the Spirit in the church, an aspect we will soon cover.

At this point it is helpful to cite McClendon's student, Terrence Tilley, who offers several clarifications as to what a story does and how it may be true. Tilley argues that stories do one of three things: they set up worlds, disrupt worlds, or are set within worlds. Stories that set up worlds are mythic in nature (in a good sense). They are not historical, but offer material to propel the reader into a spiritual awe of God, material that communicates the purpose and meaning of the cosmos, the moral order, connecting the individual to his or her world.¹⁷ Stories that upset worlds are parables and counter-myths. Counter-myths attack other foreign (whether linguistically, culturally, or both) myths using their narrative elements; parables are stories set within a community's own stories, playing with them to communicate a teaching.¹⁸ Finally, Tilley mentions what McClendon would consider realistic stories.¹⁹

Also, he continues on to offer several points on the nature of truth in a story. A story can be true as it reveals something previously unknown.²⁰ A story can also be true if it offers a coherent picture of present reality, refers accurately to historical reality, or merely attributes something accurate to a character, namely God.²¹ Third, a story is true if it aids believers to overcome self-deception and encourages discipleship.²²

Obviously, when talking about the Bible's referentiality, there is a generality to the topic. No grand theory, whether a doctrine of biblical inerrancy or a strategy of demythologization, can be used to make sweeping judgments on the historicity of the Bible. Each passage has to be weighed on its own in a process of justification similar to the one we sketched out in the previous chapter. While McClendon has a basic commitment to the Bible's historical reliability, he does

¹⁷ Terrence Tilley, *Story Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985), 40–44.

¹⁸ Tilley, *Story Theology*, 50.

¹⁹ Tilley, *Story Theology*, 52.

²⁰ Tilley, *Story Theology*, 187.

²¹ Tilley, *Story Theology*, 191.

²² Tilley, *Story Theology*, 196.

not see the Bible's history as perfect, nor does it need to be in order for it to be true and meaningful in the life of the church.

9.2 From Past Reference to Present Speech

As already mentioned in the last section, the Bible as Scripture for the church moves from a historical document, where its meaning is tied to the past, to speaking to the present. A more productive account of the Bible's meaning and truth than a historicist account occurs when we switch to the second mode: how the text is being used by the Spirit of Christ to address individuals and churches with the Word of God, as well as how churches are to correctly interpret what they hear. This is a move from past reference to present speech and use.

As we saw in Chapter Eight on speech-acts, the Bible is a part of the speech-acts of the Triune God to the church. This means moving from a positivist account, where propositions merely refer to the past, to an account of language, where language *does* something. In this case, the words on the pages of Scripture are used by the Spirit to speak, to address the church, to command and communicate with believers.

McClendon sees the Spirit speaking in a Triune pattern of the speech-act, constituting authority in the church. Theology is done in the love of the Father, the word of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit. McClendon calls this the interactive, redemptive, and unitive authority (each corresponding respectively to each person of the Trinity: II, 458). What does this mean for understanding Scripture? It means the following:

1. *The Bible is revelatory as the text is the instrument of the Spirit's speech-acts.* For McClendon, this Triune pattern of Biblical authority rests on the character of God as a revealing, interacting God. This implies a modest notion of the experience of God through the words of Scripture (CW1, 121). Following P. T. Forsyth, this does not mean experience is its own source

of truth, but rather that experience points to Christ: “essential though experience be, it cannot be faith’s fundamental” (CW1, 120). Forsyth, for McClendon, “accepted the centrality of experience, but denied its priority...[the] experience was real enough, but it pointed away from itself. It was an experience of the holiness of God” (CW1, 121). This is continually and even self-referentially attested to in Scripture, as Scripture itself is read in the community of assembled prophets (1 Cor. 14).

It is the risen Christ, the Spirit of Christ, who makes the typological structures of the text alive and ever applicable to the present church. The structure of typology in and of itself does not accomplish this on its own:

There is always a story that is integral to such knowledge, and for Christians this is so in two ways. First, there must be a vital link between the Christ we know in worship and the Christ who lived and died and rose: The story now and the story then must be linked by the identity of the Risen One. The Lord of Christian morality is not a principle or an ideal goal or *telos*, but a living Lord whose timely life confronts our stories with his own. Second, there is both a logical and a narrative link between the original church and the church now (to which we must add, “and the church that is to be”...). I call this in earlier chapters the baptist vision. And that link brings out in a second way the indispensability of narrative to morality. The shape of the story is the (moral) shape of the Christian life. (I, 331, italics McClendon’s, ellipsis mine)

Thus, the “this is that, then is now” dynamic in typology, as we have been insisting, forms a holistic sense of how and where Scripture speaks today in the life of the church.

Enter now the baptist vision. It tells us that this is that, that this true story then *is* the story now; that the *Jesus* Christ who then rose, truly rose and appeared to the disciples in the breaking of bread is present now and does appear to us in our kingdom work and our spiritual worship, in our witness—and *in this very word*. It tells us the Gospel resurrection narratives both witness to what happened then and stake a claim on what happens now. It tells us his risen presence then coheres with his risen presence now; it is its determinative forerunner; it is its cause. (II, 466)

Thus, to understand that the Spirit speaks today to the present community is to understand a different way of reading the Bible, not merely as one scrutinizes a historical document but as one lives its history.

2. *Thus, the church can be convicted that the Scriptures speak to the present, overcoming historical distance.* The heart of the baptist vision, as we have seen, is the mystical power of Scripture by the Spirit to speak today in a “this is that” manner, beyond its circumstances of writing.²³ McClendon offers an excellent example of this:

For you know that for baptists the authority of the Bible *is* the authority of our Lord Jesus. Thus when in the Book I read, “I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:22), I know that means me; no exegesis, no theory, can shield me from this word. In sex, fidelity; in court, no oaths; in time of war, love of enemies; in prayer, no hypocrisy; in property, no anxiety—for us, each *is* the word of the Lord. Ah, but those words require interpretation? So we say. Yet do we not revere Clarence Jordan, do we not honour Dorothy Day, do we not respect Will Campbell exactly because (with all their faults) they have known that these words do not require nearly as much “interpretation” as some folk think? (CW1, 124)

There is a general sense that the Bible, no matter how distant its time of writing was from the present, is capable of addressing and in fact does address the present. This is done not merely as a literary function of the text, but because the text is actually being used as a speech-act of the Spirit of Christ. Historical distance is also overcome in the practices of following Christ in community.

How is it possible to join that ancient community? Well, obviously not in some science fiction sense. We are not asked to transport ourselves backward through time any more than we are asked to reincarnate the departed members of the primitive church. Yet a community may reach across time by *sharing the relevant practices of the earlier community*. [...] [W]hen in relevant ways we participate in the practices that made that

²³ While the following is not cited by McClendon, an interesting example of this dynamic is found in Hebrews (a New Testament book that constantly cites the Old Testament). Heb. 3:7–11 quotes Ps. 95:7–8. The “you” addressed in the original context is appropriated self-consciously to now be the audience of Hebrews. In fact this Psalm citation is repeated several times (Heb. 3:15; 4:3; 4:7) with 4:7 actually citing “today” applying to the present of Hebrews’ readers in a “this is that” dynamic: “God again set a certain day, calling it, ‘Today.’ This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted.” The “today” of the Exodus people becomes the “today” of the Psalmist, and then becomes the “today” of the writer of Hebrews.

community the church, we ourselves become church. Thus the (literary) device that joins together the parts of the biblical narrative, namely typology, is also the (sociological) device that joins the church now to the primitive church. (CW2, 267)

This does not mean trying to reproduce all the practices of the ancient community, or that none of those ancient practices require revision to be lived out faithfully in the present. Instead, it is the conviction that the Spirit is re-appropriating the ancient text to speak today as the community of the faithful attempts to follow what they have been shown.

3. *The notion that Scripture speaks to the present church is supported by the practices of a listening community.* This implies a different notion of readership, one that reads Scripture the way Scripture recommends itself to be read, an ongoing notion of communal practice. McClendon states, “Telling the story locates the teller’s role in it” (III, 356).²⁴ To recount the Biblical narrative is in some way to take a position *within* the story of God with his people.

This means that to read the text the way the text most naturally ought to be read is to read the text in order to live the text. The truth of the text is apprehended most precisely through living it, seeing the validity of Christ’s identity, way, and presence in the church. To look to the biblical narrative is to follow it as a particular kind of history, the history of the people of God. McClendon writes,

For these, following has become not mere attentive perception, but life itself; now following is called discipleship. Moreover, the Christian story being what it is, such active followers will follow *by the Christian rules for following*. For what I have described here is in theological terms conversion, the turn or turnabout (*metanoia*) that by Christian rules (i.e., in line with Christian faith and morals) constitutes taking the way of Jesus as one’s own, since that is where the story leads. (III, 356)

These rules for reading involve the particular vision of what truth is that is unique to Christianity.

They presuppose a unique character.

²⁴ Theories of ideal, real, implied and intended readership are sketched out in Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 27–36.

[T]ruth requires truthfulness: truth (i.e., correspondence, coherence, verisimilitude, what works, etc.) requires a truthful life (one that has found the honesty to confess its need and the trust to receive help in the project of overcoming self-deceit). And here we can see why the prior issues of an ethic of belief in our time may be not the evidence and warrants, the scientific or logical method, and the centrality of reliable data we had supposed were the whole story, important though these may be in due course—but issues of the believer's character, and of the self-deceit by which that character evades truth's claims, and of the story or stories that may enable us to escape our own self-deceit. (I, 348)

In order to properly see the biblical narrative as “true” one must have a view of truth that is more than mere positivism. It must factor in the possibility of the transcendent; it must see wisdom in forsaking the ways of the world; it must trust the promise that the cross will end in resurrection.

Thus, Scripture speaks today as Christ is present to his community, which in turn, listens to the Scriptures the way Christ and the Apostles taught.

We know the risen Christ, we meet him today...yet we learn from the New Testament that the One we meet is the very Jesus of whom it speaks. If we share the baptist vision (“this is that”) we read the stories of him then to shed fresh light upon our encounter with him now and anticipate our fateful final meeting (“then is now”). Each implies the other. (II, 194)

How is Christ present? McClendon reiterates his three “W’s” of presence: in the proclamation of the word, in authentic worship, and in kingdom work (II, 242–43). Christ is present in the practices of relationship and service done in the church. The other criteria for how the church is to listen to the Spirit have been covered in Chapter Three.

4. *As the Spirit speaks through the text, the text can speak beyond its historical context and (human) authorial intent, and because of this capacity, the Spirit can render a passage as true even when the historicity of a passage is in doubt, offering the possibility of new meanings in light of revision.* While McClendon is committed to the general historical reliability of Scripture, since he is also committed to the idea that all Scripture can be used as a speech-act of

God to the church, a historical reference in the text need not limit the meaning of a passage nor nullify its truth if proven historically unreliable. McClendon writes,

If what they are to read has *only* the life-shaping quality that the stories of an O'Connor do or the different life-shaping quality those of a Faulkner do, may not reading the biblical stories successfully bring their readers to ask whether the "world" of these stories contains more truth than the world available through modernity's filters? This wondering may lead such readers to an unanticipated alternative: *God the Spirit*, [Julian] Hartt reminds us, can "cover every detail and the whole run of human history." That is, history may be related through its length and breadth to what God is doing in the great story that issues from Pentecost. (III, 355)

The Spirit of God reapplies the text, allowing the text to speak at all times and to all places.

Given how some passages require rethinking, reading for what the Spirit is doing now includes and requires new, possible ethical and theological references. Some passages and their accompanying theologies may have to be rethought if their historicity is in doubt. For McClendon this does not mean going beyond, for instance, Christ's bodily resurrection, but there are examples of re-appropriation in his theology and ethics.

As we have seen in Chapter Six, McClendon sets out to do this with, for instance, the doctrine of original sin, understanding that Adam was probably not a historical person, much less the founder of the human race or the originator of death in the universe. Much traditional theology requires Adam to be historical and the biblical text seems to assume his historicity, but that does not mean the text cannot be read differently or the doctrine of sin reformulated. McClendon has shown that one can read the text otherwise.

Also, any theology or ethic, McClendon warns, can become status quo: "Time makes ancient good uncouth" (II, 133). Thus, the believer must read in wisdom and discernment for a sense of what the Spirit is calling the community to do.

As the Great Story that the Bible presents becomes (for Jesus' followers) the Christian Story, some practices (and hence some rules and laws) must change, but the reason is that

Jesus sees where the story is going, and accordingly gives new direction to the way.... So there is a need for signals to the reader not to read the familiar commandments only in the light of what they had known of the story to this point. Rather, the reader must look for *a new sense of where the story is going*, and must find that sense in Jesus' own way, which the reader is now summoned to live out afresh. (I, 225)

This may entail ongoing prophetic revision, reading not for a past to recover, but for a future to break in. McClendon writes, "Not only do the Gospels identify Jesus and identify his disciples—identities which in two different ways impinge upon the reader; the Gospels also identify a narrative world, *the coming kingdom*" (I, 336). While this future kingdom is only identified from the life of Christ, this does not mean Christianity is bound to the practices of the first century. For McClendon, Christianity's practices are accessed by the criterion of the kingdom of God.

As Curtis Freeman recommends, this means that disciples must discern how to effectively live out Christ in the present, embodying their part of the coming kingdom. This entails, in turn, that the believer must read while listening for "further light."²⁵ As the hymn by George Rawson goes (which was based on John Robinson's speech to those on the *Mayflower*),

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind—
By notions of our day and sect—crude, partial, and confined
That universe, how much unknown! That ocean unexplored!
For God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.
Eternal God, Incarnate Word, Spirit of flame and dove,
Enlarge, expand all living souls to comprehend your love;
and help us all to seek your will with wiser powers conferred
O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.²⁶

Thus, these things are only known or discerned through the figures of Scripture, but nevertheless have the ability to call into question the present order, even present interpretations of Scripture, by the Scriptures speaking afresh. While McClendon does not explicitly use the language of

²⁵ Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor, 2014), ch. 7.

²⁶ George Rawson, "We Limit Not The Truth of God," *Hymnary for Use in Baptist Churches*, ed. Baptist Hymnary Committee of Canada (Toronto: Ryerson, 1936), no. 447.

“reading for further light,” other voices in the baptist tradition recommend this (such as John Smyth, John Robinson, Henry Alline, Isaac Backus, William Newton Clarke, etc.). McClendon’s anastatic dimension is certainly congruent with this. Reading for further light many require rethinking a doctrine that is based on inaccurate historical references, it may require rethinking a doctrine that has been held traditionally by Christians yet does not actually comport with the findings of the whole Bible, or it may require believers to revise a theological reading of a text that leads to ethically problematic actions.

Of course, such reading can have, and indeed has had, disastrous missteps, so additional criteria might aid in the application of new references. McClendon does not pretend that this form of reading has not had such missteps, so he warns the reader that no amount of criteria can protect the reader from reading fallibly. McClendon does not seek to provide a comprehensive list of the “essential” historical events of the Bible. The Bible itself does not supply such material. But McClendon would not agree with liberals that seek to reinterpret Christianity without a historical resurrection. For McClendon, the resurrection is the historical “sign of signs” (II, 186), the sign on which all else depends. Thus, how one historical or ethical assertion is seen as essential and another not, and so perhaps requiring reformulation, cannot be solved in advance, but must be discerned in community.

In ethics, there are other thinkers that could supply some additional criteria here. The nuanced criteria offered by William Webb and his redemptive movement hermeneutic looks at the criteria within Scripture for movement forward, which complements McClendon’s project. Redemptive movement hermeneutics can add criteria and nuance to McClendon’s general theory.²⁷ This still calls, however, for the church to be the site of ecclesial discernment.

²⁷ On four topics Webb offers his redemptive movement hermeneutic: William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); *Corporal*

Thus, in understanding that the biblical text can be used by the Spirit as a speech-act addressing the church today, beyond its original, human authorial intent and occasion of writing, we understand a different mode of referring in Scripture. It is less concerned with historical referentiality (although in some ways it assumes it) and more concerned with a present message. Through this dynamic, passages that have problematic (but not fatal) historical or ethical assertions can still be used by the Spirit to speak a different message than it may originally or traditionally have done. However, this process is performed by a discerning community that uses all the resources it can in order to listen and to apply Scripture properly today.

9.3 Conclusion

As McClendon reminds the modern reader, “the story the Bible tells is God’s own story, told in the way God pleases to tell it” (II, 476). While the historical reliability of Scripture is important—for example, the Bible is heavily invested in a historical resurrection (1 Cor. 15)—this does not mean the Bible’s historical references are perfect or infallible, not even necessarily the ones that some deem essential. McClendon feels that most of the core historical assertions are reliable, but that does not mean, for instance, that Adam had to have been a historical person or that Moses had to have written the Pentateuch. Does that mean these passages are worthless? McClendon, in concert with Frei, recommends a realistic reading strategy where the Bible is read as an integral narrative. Regardless of whether a passage’s history is accurate or not, the passage remains meaningful as a narrative whole. Seeing the text as a speech-act of the Spirit, the words of Scripture are not bound to its origin, as its words can be used by the Spirit to speak to the church today, even beyond the words’ original intent. In the practices of community, the Bible is not merely a historical document that once said something, but the instrument of the Spirit that is

Punishment in the Bible (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011). With regards to violence, see Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture* (San Francisco: Metanoia, 2014).

speaking now, sometimes in a new way. What this means for each passage, whether historically accurate or not, culturally distanced or not, is a matter to be discerned in faithful community. Nevertheless, moving from past reference to present speech is a part of understanding the baptist vision where the Bible speaks afresh today as believers gather to follow Christ.

Chapter 10: What Is a “baptist” Anyway?

“Baptists do not agree on where they came from, who they are, or how they got that way. In other words, Baptists do not agree on their historical origin, their theological identity, or their subsequent denominational history.”

- Walter B. Shurden¹

Baptists have often heard the Holy Spirit convicting them of different doctrines than the established churches of their day. Baptist believers have passed along these convictions to others, thus constituting a historical tradition of sorts. A standard definition of Baptist (with a capital “B”) is found in the beloved acrostic, BAPTIST: B (believer’s baptism), A (autonomy of the local church), P (primacy of Scripture), T (true believers in the church), I (individual competency and believers’ priesthood), S (separation of church and state), T (two ordinances).² As we have noticed, McClendon holds to all these elements, but chooses to organize his proposal in the “baptist” vision, a typological dynamic nicknamed “this is that, then is now.” From this typological vision, McClendon organizes baptist identity into marks such as Biblicism, liberty, community, discipleship, and witness, following a more Anabaptist-like scheme for these distinctives.³ The Baptist Manifesto (or “Baptifesto”), co-written by McClendon in 1997, was an attempt to see some of these convictions realized in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), but was heavily criticized for its Anabaptist link. Until now, we have assumed a connection between the Anabaptists and the Baptists that McClendon operates with. But this research project argues for the productive relationship in the baptist vision between narrative theology and the practices of baptist life; so we must ask further, what is the nature of this connection between Baptists and

¹ Walter B. Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25:4 (Winter 1998): 321.

² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 82.

³ This builds off of the distinctives of community, discipleship and nonviolent witness given in Harold Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy Hersberger (Scottsdale: Herald, 1957): 29-56.

Anabaptists? Fundamental to the baptist vision is the success of McClendon's rather complex definition of "baptist," a term with a unique and vigorously contested historiography (e.g., especially the nature of the connection between Baptists and Anabaptists), which has caused McClendon's work to be unpopular in his SBC home.⁴ Is the baptist identity forcing Baptists to be something they are not? He adopts Anabaptist convictions, but the Baptifesto intends an authentic Baptist self-description. However, it is also a self-description that realizes that the Baptist identity needs revising. McClendon asserts a unified identity of Baptist and Anabaptists (and others), based not merely on history, but with the intent to bring different churches together. Perhaps one of the reasons for the Baptifesto's rejection was because it operates under a set of historical and ecclesial assumptions, some of which are less than clear. Much like the baptist vision itself, it seeks similarity in the midst of apparent dissimilarity.

In this chapter, we will first look at what "baptist" means for McClendon in full. McClendon's definition of baptist is not a simple one, as it is intended to build an inclusive platform for free churches. This baptist identity influenced the Baptifesto in Southern Baptist life. However, it was heavily criticized. So, second, we will look at the negative reception of the Baptifesto. We will respond to the objections other Southern Baptists made to this manifesto, reiterating that while McClendon had Anabaptist convictions, the manifesto introduced nothing foreign to Baptists. As we will see, it also raises other concerns about the nature of baptists and Baptists.

⁴ As a point of clarification, "baptist" will denote McClendon's proposed inclusive definition. Meanwhile, "Baptist" and "Anabaptist" will be used to designate the two distinct denominational and historic groups that have traditionally been thought to be separate.

10.1 The “baptist” Type: The Proposal

McClendon writes, “Heirs of the Radical Reformation are often theologically pigeonholed as confused (though sincere) Protestants. If that is what we are, we need to end the confusion by locating our true home in Reformed or Lutheran contexts. If not, we need to know why” (II, 8–9). As we stated in a previous chapter, McClendon brings the baptist identity together in its vision of typological reading: “this is that, then is now.” However, because all Christian traditions can use typological reading, the baptist vision, as we have shown, is what it is because of its assumed ecclesiology that grounds it (which we have already explored a fair bit in Chapter Three). This section will explore the meaning of the multi-faceted definition, “baptist,” so that we can further examine its viability. What we will see is that this notion is complex, beginning with McClendon’s Baptist and Anabaptist convictions, which he claims are historically connected but also draw together several other distinct identities into one inclusive identity. These are as follows:

1. *baptist means most definitively Anabaptist and Southern Baptist moderate.* We see in McClendon’s life (which we have recounted earlier) the most tangible meaning of this “baptist” term: an (autobiographical) hybrid of Southern Baptist moderate and Anabaptist. McClendon was raised, educated, and ordained a Southern Baptist, educated under Walter Conner. McClendon was a moderate. He was functionally exiled from his community of faith in the ensuing fundamentalist takeover of the South that began in the 1950s. As we observed, he supported Martin Luther King, Jr., and racial equality, and was forced to resign because of his suspected “liberalism,” pushing him into a space of theological and ecclesial wandering. He always remained a Southern Baptist at heart, but this identity shifted in the mid-1970s as McClendon had a “second conversion” in reading the work of John Howard Yoder.

McClendon's Baptist identity came to include and be supplemented by the (so-called) "Anabaptist" tradition, a shift that led to some intentional forming of his program of research in the 1980s.⁵ Later in his career he even pastored a Brethren (German Baptist) church in Pasadena. Within his theology these two influences (Southern Baptist moderate and Anabaptist) show through the strongest.

For McClendon, Baptists and Anabaptists are his most direct and most quoted influences, and therefore the most significant contributors to the meaning of "baptist." This is evident in his book, *Ethics*, and his co-edited volume, *Baptist Roots*. In *Ethics*, he gives Conrad Grebel as the first example of a baptist, and from there, supplies almost exclusively Baptist thinkers (except for John Howard Yoder) in a compiled list extending into the twentieth century. In *Baptist Roots*, his work begins with Petr Chelcicky. Since McClendon does not hold to a secessionist view of baptist identity, Chelcicky must be seen as a kind of proto-baptist. Again, from that point on, *Baptist Roots* names mostly Baptist thinkers from the 17th century on. However, it should be noted that McClendon is keen on including marginalized voices in this reader, such as moderates like Dale Moody or Walter Conner, liberals like Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Walter Rauschenbusch, as well as female figures like Helen Barrett Montgomery, black voices like Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Hispanic Baptists like Orlando Costas. His biographical examples feature Hans Hut, Martin Luther King, Jr., Clarence Jordan, etc. Additionally, in *Doctrine*, he sketches out the major influences of his "confessional place," which include Walter Rauschenbusch, Walter Conner (his professor and mentor), E. Y. Mullins, and Georgia Harkness as well as a host of others (II, 56–62).

⁵ McClendon, "The Concept of Authority: A Baptist View," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 16:2 (Summer 1989): 103: "One of church history's perverse omissions is a due analysis of the role of the sixteenth-century baptists, the so-called ana-baptists, many of whom from the 1520s on managed to *combine* radical Biblicism with radical communitarianism, producing an authentic community of discipleship. I believe that is a worthy goal for us."

For McClendon's part, his argument for a historic connection between Anabaptists and Baptists is fairly minimal, and also not particularly necessary. He notes that in *Ethics* that while many Baptists have tried to disassociate themselves from the Anabaptists, his colleague, Glen Stassen, has shown a tangible connection between the Particular Baptists and the Mennonites. While Mennonites did not practice believer's baptism by immersion exclusively, and while the Particular Baptists were largely antagonistic toward Anabaptists, the *First London Confession* seems to have summarized its baptismal theology from Menno Simon's *Foundation-Book*, and there are records of the English congregations having fellowship and even sending delegates (Richard Blunt, for example) to the Dutch Collegiants,⁶ after which the Particular Baptists implemented immersion.⁷ Also, Stassen has shown that Particular Baptists of this time displayed a "softened" Calvinism, tempered by themes from Mennonite theology.⁸ McClendon's baptist identity, as we will see, does not require direct historical links, but in the case of the Baptists and Anabaptists, McClendon does seem to think there is one. Since McClendon does not offer much in the way of historical evidence, the evidence and significance of the historical Anabaptist-Baptists connection will be sketched out in an appendix. However, it is enough for the moment to conclude that "baptist" means Anabaptists and Baptists—and more.

⁶ The Collegiants, who received their name because they called their services "*collegia*," were a mixed group closely but not exclusively tied to the Mennonite church. They believed in the priesthood of all believers, adult baptism, rejection of military service, simplicity in life and dress; they rejected the pursuit of offices and lived out a strong benevolent communitarian ethic. Most of them eventually joined the Waterlanders in 1654.

See Nanne van der Zijpp, "Collegiants," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Collegiants&oldid=120967> (accessed 16 June 2015).

⁷ Glen Harold Stassen, "Opening Menno Simon's *Foundation-Book* and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins Alongside the Mother-Calvinist Congregationalism," *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1998): 34–44.

⁸ Glen Harold Stassen, "Revisioning Baptist Identity by Naming Our Origin and Character Rightly," *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1998): 45–54. Stanley A. Nelson has argued that some of the supposedly direct influence actually came by William Ames in his *Marrow of Theology*. See "Reflecting on Baptist Origins: The London Confession of Faith of 1644," *Baptist History and Heritage* 29 (1994): 34–35. While Nelson rightly demonstrates that Ames was an important influence on the confession, he insufficiently demonstrates Ames' influence over the articles of baptism. This is where Stassen, rebutting Nelson in 1998 (see immediately above), shows that the language of the confession "followed Menno in the same words, the same meanings, the same Scripture passages, and in basically the same order" (41).

2. *baptist means believer's churches, free churches, sect type and Pentecostal type churches*. McClendon describes this identity using the frameworks of several thinkers: Ernst Troeltsch, Leslie Newbigin, and Donald Durnbaugh. Religious sociologists like Troeltsch have suggested an alternative mode of Christianity, called the “sect” type.⁹ The “sect” type held to three principles: (1) the separation of church and state, (2) voluntarism as the form of the church, and (3) individual liberty of conscience over against the state (I, 29).

This type also generally corresponds also to what Newbigin calls the “Pentecostal” type (II, 342).¹⁰ This type, for both Newbigin and McClendon, is correctly identified by (1) the gift and leading of the Spirit,¹¹ (2) a community of discernment, (3) a comparatively more resolutely Christocentric approach to Reformed traditions, etc. (II, 343). Under this heading, we see that McClendon includes charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity loosely included within the “baptist” identity.

Finally, McClendon’s work presupposes Durnbaugh’s historiography and descriptors of the “believer’s church” (alternatively, “believers’ church,” emphasizing the *community* of believers), which is a kind of third mode distinct from Protestantism and Catholicism, who refused state involvement, among them Quakers, Methodists, Pentecostals and the Confessing Church (I, 19).¹² Thus, McClendon moves beyond historical connections and uses Anabaptist historiographical and ecclesial assumptions to propose his inclusive “baptist” type. This “baptist” identity is therefore less a historical connection and more a modal similarity.

⁹ From Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

¹⁰ See Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship, 1954); cited by McClendon in II, 434.

¹¹ McClendon is open to Charismatic expressions of Christianity as part of his “baptist” identity, but he does not appear to support Pentecostal arguments for initial evidence (see II, 434–39).

¹² See Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believer’s Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1968). Also see Franklin Littell, *The Free Church: The Significance of the Left Wing of the Reformation for Modern American Protestantism* (Boston: Starr King, 1957). Also, for the most comprehensive articulation of the free-church model, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

3. *baptist means churches that are neither Protestant nor Catholic.* McClendon sees “baptist” identity as possibly including a wide variety of church traditions that do not historically fit into “Baptist” and “Anabaptist” identities but also do not fit well into other schemes, such as Protestant or Catholic. His theology is intended for

Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren, Adventists, Russian Evangelicals, perhaps Quakers, certainly black Baptists (who often go by other names), the (Anderson, Indiana) Church of God, Southern and British and European and American Baptists, the Church of the Brethren, the Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal bodies, assorted intentional communities not self-defined as churches, missionary affiliates of all the above. (I, 33–34)

This description is more modal or ideal, based on Troeltsch, Newbigin, and Durnbaugh’s platforms. It describes a set of identities that are not necessarily historically rooted in each other but do share certain ecclesial resemblances. The challenge, as we will see, is that many of these identities (even the ones that are historically connected) may recognize but do not necessarily affirm one another.

4. *baptist could broadly mean a sympathy for any radicals in any Christian tradition.* McClendon even goes so far as to include certain communities and thinkers in Latin American liberation theology, but not without some qualifications (I, 258). His biographical work includes Charles Ives, Dag Hammarskjöld, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, etc., not all of whom hold to the same theological distinctives or identity as McClendon does as a baptist. Some of these seem to be included due to some other convictional similarity (e.g., Bonhoeffer, whose pacifism and emphasis on a discipleship-oriented community are personally and theologically important to McClendon); others are included because they were radicals and revisionists within their own tradition (e.g., Ives or Day), and still others may simply have seemed interesting to McClendon (e.g., Sarah and Jonathan Edwards).

This proclivity towards radicals comports well with the “anastatic” dimension of baptist identity previously sketched out in Chapter Four. Thus, because baptist understand that past formulations can become stale or worse, idols, the necessity of looking to others and listening to new voices is essential to the baptist identity.

5. *baptist means, in McClendon’s theology, a synthesis of convictions.* McClendon includes Anabaptists and synthesizes certain of their convictions with his Baptist ones. As we have seen in previous chapters, his distinctives are framed in terms of Bible, liberty, community, discipleship, and mission (after Harold Bender) rather than Baptist visions as such. His eschatology looks to Hans Hut as an exemplar. His soteriology is closer to the Anabaptists’ notions of new life and the walk with Christ than to a Reformed justification by faith. His atonement theory likewise prioritizes the Anabaptist emphasis on taking up the cross,¹³ rather than a theory of penal substitutionary atonement or the like. He teaches the typological reading of Scripture in a community of discernment, based on an Anabaptist application of 1 Corinthians 14.¹⁴ He maintains baptism by immersion (that Baptists exclusively hold to), but takes up pacifism (which Anabaptists have adamantly upheld). McClendon clearly espoused these convictions because he thought they were biblically true, but cited Anabaptist historical influences as a source of enrichment to his Baptists convictions. His anastatic understanding of baptist identity allowed him to talk about the contributions of Pentecostalism’s gift of the Spirit and Methodism’s emphasis on holiness in his soteriology. However, all of this together, as we will see, did cause confusion involving the Baptifesto.

¹³ While he cites Anabaptists on this matter in *Doctrine*, we should note that his teacher, Walter Conner, taught a similar view as merely biblical. See Conner, *The Gospel of Redemption* (Nashville: Broadman, 1945), ch. 3.

¹⁴ While modern Baptists do not practice what is described in 1 Cor. 14, as Freeman points out, this was commonly practiced in early Baptist congregations. See Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor, 2014), 293. Thus, while McClendon might have learned this practice from present Anabaptist churches or theologians, this practice is not foreign historically from Baptists.

6. *baptist intends a proposal for the future unity.* McClendon's theology drew the following criticism from Carl Braaten:

[For McClendon] the debate in ecclesiology is thus not merely two-sided "between Protestants and Catholics" but three-sided, with Baptists representing a distinctly third type, neither Protestant nor Catholic. This is not without its problems. Thinking in terms of historic types that deserve to be represented may suffice for determining who should attend an ecumenical theology conference. All voices have a right to be heard, but that does not make them right, dogmatically speaking. The truth we seek in dogmatic inquiry cannot be determined by assuring a fair representation of preferences. Furthermore, McClendon's typology does not include Eastern Orthodoxy, an ecclesiological tradition even more underrepresented than the Baptist/Pentecostal type in modern theology. And one must ask whether it would not be more useful in an ecumenical age to reinterpret the Baptist communities that trace their lineage back to the radical reformation.¹⁵

Braaten's objection is that merely trying to represent baptist theology in the ecumenical context seems unconstructive, a step backwards. Why continue to assert old differences? Should not baptists, as he says, "reinterpret" themselves? McClendon seems to merely be writing a theology from the perspective of Baptists, Anabaptists, and all others that fit into his schema, but given that the Anabaptist connection is only a loose one and many others are not historically connected to it (some being overtly opposed), it seems that McClendon is actually prescribing something for the future of all these groups previously outlined.

What Braaten fails to see is that the baptist vision *is* a reinterpretation, a prescription for bringing together these other identities into one mode. For this reason, McClendon's disciple, Curtis Freeman, defends the type as an ideal type, not necessarily a historic one.

McClendon's "baptist" type is an *ideal* type, which as Max Weber famously described it, is a "mental construct" that "cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality." [...] The point of utilizing a type is not to describe discrete concrete phenomena, but rather as a theory to explain the big picture. Typologies then are not true or false, but only helpful or unhelpful for further investigation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carl Braaten, "A Harvest of Evangelical Theology," *First Things* 63 (May 1996): 48.

¹⁶ Curtis W. Freeman, "Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists," in I, ix.

Freeman insists that McClendon is offering an ideal to see, to *envision*, a kind of third form of Christianity. Freeman is right in insisting that this type does not exist in reality fully and tangibly but only as a mental construct.

McClendon is perhaps prescribing Anabaptism as a model for understanding the unity amongst diversity that exists within the “baptist” type he is describing. Understanding this helps to further explain the seemingly syncretistic incorporation of other identities within the baptist one. Anabaptists began in multiple places, such as in Switzerland (Grebel, Mantz), Waldshut (Hubmaier), Schleithem (Sattler), Augsburg (Denck), Strasbourg (Hut and Marpeck), Münster (Rothmann), or in the Netherlands (Simons), etc. Anabaptists originated as several independent streams of European radicals who all concluded similar (though not uniform) convictions and, over time, recognized each other.¹⁷ Thus, Anabaptists, necessitated perhaps by the nature of their beginnings, understand their lines of unity as very loose, looking for generous basic common convictions amongst diversity, easily seeing Baptists, Quakers, Pentecostals, etc., as holding some kind of kinship.¹⁸ Rather than fixating on one founder and an unbroken line of institutional influence or even a uniform set of doctrinal distinctives, Anabaptist theologians (such as Harold Bender) have proposed a commonality based on a minimal set of core convictions despite differences over other convictions, influences, founding thinkers, and institutional or denominational streams. While Baptists might be less willing to recognize non-Baptists (Anabaptists, Mennonites, or Brethren, let alone Pentecostals or Presbyterians, etc.), from the Anabaptist perspective, McClendon’s notion of “baptists” offers this inclusive potential for those that are willing to embrace it.

¹⁷ As noted earlier, for a brief account of these multiple origins, see Durnbaugh, *Believer’s Church*, 64–94.

¹⁸ See William Lumpkin and Bill Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 2011).

We would also point out that Baptists, if just defined as an Anglo-American movement (not including the continental Anabaptists), also require a similar recognition. There is little historical connection between the first Baptists in England and North America as the groups organically emerged independently but then recognized each other, particularly when American Baptists reproduced the *Second London Confession* (1677) in their own *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (1742).

Thus, McClendon is trying both to be historically descriptive of baptists, but also to recommend a model that is prescriptive for a fragmented identity. For McClendon, the vision intends a generous and honest pluralism of doctrine (which we will sketch out in the next chapter).

So, “baptist” means several things, and some meanings are more concrete than others. First, “baptist” describes McClendon’s Baptist denominational heritage, particularly, and we can see that he had a heart to include here those voices that have been neglected by fundamentalists. This heritage extends to the Anabaptist tradition through which he had a spiritual awakening, particularly from reading the work of Yoder. The connection between Baptists and Anabaptists is one that he sees as real and historical, despite present denominational divides (thus this conviction is particularly significant). Second, this description applies to all who share a free-church ecclesiology as described by Troeltsch, Newbigin, and Durnbaugh. The third meaning is even more general in scope: all those churches that do not neatly fit into the standard Catholic or Protestant expressions. This level is more intuitive and prescriptive in nature. Fourth, McClendon sees kinship with radicals in *any* tradition that shares theological similarities and sympathies with his own, such as his appreciation for Catholic liberation theology, Day, or Bonhoeffer. Fifth, then, he seems to bring Anabaptist and Baptist convictions together in his

Systematic Theology as a kind of productive synthesis. Sixth, this means that the nature of the proposal is prescriptive in order to bring these groups together. Thus, McClendon's wideness of inclusion seems to move from the Anabaptist-Baptist core, to baptist-like thinkers, to an affinity to any radical in any Christian tradition. This, then, is a proposal that moves from historical description to an ecumenical prescription.

Thus, in defining what a "baptist" means, we see a definition that is complex. It has potential but at the same time is precarious. This tension between a historic, descriptive connection between Baptists and Anabaptists (which, as we will see, is far from granted, for many Baptists!), as well as an inclusive, synthetic, and even syncretistic prescriptive dimension, makes this proposal difficult to assess.

10.2 The "Baptifesto" Controversy: The Problem Surfaces

Perhaps because of some of the complexity just mentioned, McClendon's theology has not seen wide acceptance,¹⁹ even and perhaps especially in McClendon's home denomination of the Southern Baptist Convention. This rejection became clear in 1997 when a document call the "Baptist Manifesto" (again, often referred to as the "Baptifesto") was drafted and signed, McClendon being one of its chief intellectual architects. The document did not achieve the acceptance for which its authors were hoping,²⁰ and so we will analyze its rejection so as to more fully understand the feasibility of McClendon's proposal.

¹⁹ Those articles written in criticism of the Baptifesto: Robert P. Jones, "Revisioning Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26:1 (Spring 1999): 35–57 (Jones points out that the Baptifesto is implicitly a revision of Shurden's four-fold identity, to which he states his preference of Shurden's statement); Walter B. Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25:4 (Winter 1998): 321–40, and Shurden, *Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993). Shurden's four freedoms are (1) Bible freedom, (2) soul freedom, (3) church freedom, (4) religious freedom.

²⁰ Those in support of the "Baptifesto": Mikael Broadway, "'Dangerous and Un-Baptistic'? A Response from Supporters of the 'Baptist Manifesto,'" *Associated Baptist Press* (Feb. 1, 2006); Kyle Childress, "No Lonely Prophets," *Baptists Today* (Oct. 16, 1997); Curtis W. Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Fall 1997): 273–302, and Freeman, "A New Perspective on Baptist Identity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Spring 1999): 59–65; Elizabeth Newman, "A Misunderstood Point," *Baptists*

Before we can accomplish that, we must summarize and paraphrase the five articles of the Baptifesto:

- (1) We affirm Bible Study in reading communities rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed “scientific objectivity”;
- (2) We affirm following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency;
- (3) We affirm a free common life in Christ in gathered, reforming communities rather than withdrawn, self-chosen, or authoritarian ones;
- (4) We affirm baptism, preaching, and the Lord’s table as powerful signs that seal God’s faithfulness in Christ and express our response of awed gratitude rather than mechanical rituals or mere symbols;
- (5) We affirm freedom and renounce coercion as a distinct people under God rather than relying on political theories, powers, or authorities.²¹

In these tenets we see the baptist vision and much of its assumed ecclesiology. But again, we must focus at least as much on the primary criticisms of these tenets as on the tenets themselves. And as a preliminary comment on the criticisms discussed below, we should remember that one reason for the criticisms had little to do with the document itself, but because the original draft of the Baptifesto was patterned deliberately after Baptist leader Walter Shurden’s exposition of Baptist identity as “Four Fragile Freedoms.”²² While the Baptifesto was edited in its final form with softer language and with a fifth point added to Shurden’s four, the damage was already done. Many, in particular Shurden himself, saw the document as antagonistic. Beyond that preliminary comment, this section will not advance any unique speculation, but will offer the four reasons for its rejection given by Kyle Childress, a friend of McClendon’s and supporter of

Today (Oct. 16, 1997); Philip Thompson, “A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking a Catholic Spirit Among Early Baptists,” *Pro Ecclesia* 8 (Winter 1999): 51–72; Philip Thompson, “Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical, Theological, and Liturgical Analysis,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Fall 2000): 287–302; and McClendon, “An Open Letter to Frank Stagg,” *Baptists Today* (Oct. 16, 1997).

²¹ Curtis W. Freeman, et al., “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997): 303–10.

²² Jones cites the original statement in full in “Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective,” 41. Originally, the Baptifesto was four statements directly stating disagreement with Bible-, soul-, church-, and state freedom.

the manifesto, as a rubric for understanding the objections voiced by Shurden, Robert Jones, and others.²³ We will state each objection and note its misconceptions.

1. *The Baptifesto was too Anabaptist.* Many saw the Baptifesto as operating too much with an assumed link to Anabaptist theological distinctives, influenced by Yoder and his disciple, Stanley Hauerwas. This historical connection, which we have noted above, is a link that many Baptists reject.²⁴ Both Shurden and Jones saw the Baptifesto as an attempt to insert Anabaptist values into Southern Baptist life.²⁵

McClendon himself assumes the connection and at several points appropriates Anabaptist theology as his own, but this objection is more complex than that. The writers, while influenced by Anabaptism, were merely seeking to be faithful to a productive Baptist self-description. While Anabaptism influenced some of the writers, the Baptifesto does not contain any convictions that Baptists have not proposed themselves. In particular, Freeman notes that much of the statement was inspired from the challenge Carlyle Marney gave to his fellow Baptists. Freeman summarizes Marney's view:

Soul competency metamorphosed into atomistic individualism expressed in the folk-lie that "every tub should set on its own bottom," destroying the conviction of the church as a creative fellowship. *Local church autonomy* turned into a kind of ecclesial guerrilla warfare that lost a sense of the church universal. *The sufficiency of the Scriptures* mutated into an idolatrous biblical literalism severing the church from the living memory of Jesus Christ in Christian tradition. *Separation of church and state* became so distorted that

²³ Kyle Childress, interview by author, Oct. 15, 2013, phone conversation with written notes. Also, these following four issues are well described in Andrew Black's work on the subject, which traces the argument through the letters written in *Baptist Today* and other forums. Andrew Black, "Kingdom of Priests or Democracy of Competent Souls? The 'Baptist Manifesto,' John Howard Yoder, and the Question of Baptist Identity," (M. Div. Thesis, Baylor University, 2006).

²⁴ However, at the same time, William Estep, a prominent Southern Baptist historian, argued for the connection. See Estep, *Why Baptists? A Study of Baptist Faith and Heritage* (Dallas: Baptistway, 1997), 47.

²⁵ Jones, "Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective," 42. Cf. Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 340. Shurden reports an unpublished paper by Fisher Humpreys, who pejoratively called the Baptifesto "an Anabaptist tract for our times" (340), meaning it was an apologetical piece for Anabaptist theology, not a restatement of Baptist identity. Black cites oral statements of Foy Dan Valentine, the head of the Christian Life Commission for the SBC, denouncing the connection publicly: "We have never been Anabaptists." See Black, "Kingdom of Priests," 106.

Baptists developed a schizophrenic vision of sacred and secular, of world and creation. *Believer's baptism* went so far as to virtually ignore the significance of initiation into the fellowship of Christ.²⁶

2. *The Baptist Manifesto* was seen as too communitarian, needlessly attacking private interpretation and soul competency. The appeal to communal reading over private or objective reading of Scripture was seen as going against their own notion of Baptist soul liberty, condoning authoritarian ways of interpretation. Scott Bryant argued that historically, early English Baptists had held freedom of conscience to be inviolable, even against one's community.²⁷ Shurden, for his part, writes, "For Baptists private interpretation of Scripture is not a post-Enlightenment appropriation of democratic individualism and egalitarianism; it is part of their earliest seventeenth-century heritage."²⁸ Shurden was overtly mortified at Hauerwas, when he remarked that the Bible did not deserve to be in the hands of the (undisciplined) people.²⁹ This went against the hallmark defensive rhetoric of the moderates and liberals alike, who appealed to the interpretive autonomy of all people to defend themselves against the conservatives, who, in turn, argued that these individuals were dissenting from the convictions of the community and therefore could be dismissed.³⁰

²⁶ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 193. Carlyle Marney's primary works that Freeman meditates through are *Beyond Our Time and Place* (Charlotte: Endowment Fund of the Myers Park Baptist Church, 1975) and *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974).

²⁷ Scott E. Bryant, "An Early English Baptist Response to the Baptist Manifesto," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011): 237–48. We will not deal with this objection here, but we will note that there was *both* an emphasis on autonomy as well as covenanted community. See Paul Fiddes' account of the theology of covenant in John Smyth's thought in *Tracks and Traces* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 21–47.

²⁸ See Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 327. Shurden argues that the manifesto emphasizes the freedom of the community and the freedom in redemption but neglects the freedom of the individual and the freedom given in creation (334).

²⁹ Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 326. Shurden is quoting Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

³⁰ Black, "Kingdom of Priests," 146. Shurden saw the emphasis on community as potentially swallowing the responsible, autonomous individual in "Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 324, 336. Also, a good example of this was when Russell Dilday argued that the way Baptists would weather the storm of controversy was to move "from *forced uniformity* to the higher ground of *autonomous individualism*," which he stated in his "On Higher Ground," reprinted in *Texas Baptist Committed*, April 1997, 11–14, quoted in Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 194.

With regards to soul competency and private interpretation (one legitimating the other), both Freeman and McClendon worried that contemporary soul competency, more than the hallmark baptist conviction of soul liberty and the priesthood of all believers,³¹ was a product of modernistic anthropology, encouraging privatized interpretation, something Shurden is actually against.³² Freeman demonstrated that modern soul competency was often articulated by looking to the competent rational and autonomous mind. As the Baptifesto states, its disagreement was then how the theory was used: “We affirm following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency.” The implication of soul competency was that every person is a competent interpreter regardless of faith maturity, and thus any submission to authority, tradition, or community was illegitimate interference. The result was that soul competency could be “invoked” to refuse accountable discipleship in community.

But does this mean that the community has more authority than the individual, as some worried? The critics apparently forgot that McClendon and the other writers were dissenters within the SBC, challenging the convictions of their communities, and were well aware of it. McClendon at several points challenges historic traditions of the community.³³ He uses unique and historical critical readings to challenge past convictions when needed. For him, community is not infallible, and it can be challenged. Yet, the Baptifesto rightly points out that the priesthood of all believers entails being priests for each other, thus soul competency cannot mean

³¹ The distinction between the priesthood of all believers, soul liberty, and soul competency is delineated well by Timothy George, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.2 (1989): 283–94.

³² Curtis W. Freeman, “E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” *Review and Expositor* 96.1 (Winter 1999), 23–42.

³³ He does so on traditional views of God (disagreeing with impassibility), Trinity (disagreeing with Patristic versions), Christology (disagreeing with two-natures approaches in favor of two-narrative), atonement (dissenting from the penal substitutionary atonement much favored in conservative Southern Baptist theology), eschatology (looking to picture theory and not more literalist forms that Baptists have historically upheld), etc.

the exclusion of other Christians (whether communities or traditions) in one's relation to God.³⁴ While individuals are free to relate to God, even to the point of differing with their community, that does not deter from the fact that the individual is fallible, finite, and must be accountable to a community in order to be fully obedient to God. For McClendon, community is not a place that restricts the interpreter, but rather listens to all voices, traditional and revisionist, opening up avenues for conversation and discernment:

Thus the prophet judges the community, but the community also judges whether the prophet is true or false; each in a sense exercises some authority over the other. [...] For if we take the baptist line that no authority is final save that of God, then each human authority must find its seat on a Ferris wheel of discernment, interpretation, obedience, and action that has no priestly summit, no top seat—not “the clergy,” not the solitary “believer-priest” with his or her Bible, not the “whole church in council,” since each of these is secured to others in the wheel, and all in turn must swing beneath the judgment of God. (CW1, 124–25)

Communal interpretation is about upholding the *equality* of voices, not just the autonomous *self-assertion* of voices or the voice of the mob. Freeman and McClendon's insistence against soul competency and private interpretation is against how an individual could refuse to listen to another on principle, using autonomy to disregard finitude and fallibility.³⁵

Shurden adamantly disagreed that soul competency is modern in origin, but, more importantly, soul competency means for him both the liberty *and* the responsibility of every believer before God.³⁶ So, perhaps, it should be clarified that Freeman and McClendon were attacking only one *form* of soul competency, a perversion of its better expressions. It is one thing to say all people can relate responsibly to God and another to state that people can do so because they are a rational, autonomous minds, prioritizing the immediacy of privatized experience over

³⁴ Freeman, et al., “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity,” 305.

³⁵ Freeman, et al., “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity,” 304.

³⁶ Shurden, “Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 326, 330, 331.

and against the resources of communal accountability, disciplined learning, and the authority of tradition.

Understood that way, Shurden does not seem very different from McClendon. Shurden admits that soul competency also entails soul responsibility to be fully obedient and appropriately accountable to the community.³⁷ While he is a historical-critical interpreter, his practice, similar to McClendon's, moves onto a figural way of hearing the text speak today.³⁸ Shurden notes that interpretation is an individual's responsibility, but it is to be intensely personal but not privatized.³⁹ Shurden wisely points out that what is at issue in the Baptifesto is the long-standing tension in Baptist identity between individual freedom and responsibility.⁴⁰ Thus, understood one way, the Baptifesto writers were merely appealing to Baptist convictions of responsibility, while Shurden and others, to liberty. It seems that in this regard, McClendon and Shurden stand fairly close, two sides of the same coin. For both the soul is free but also responsible. The community can be problematic to the interpreter, or it can empower and enrich. It can be a place where genuine voices are heard or silenced. McClendon promoted the former but was interpreted as setting up the latter.

3. *The Baptifesto was not sufficiently political.* Shurden did not express any disagreement on the Baptifesto's political prescription to disavow coercive strategies, but noted that if this meant withdrawal from responsible politics, it was against the Baptist calling to forward human rights.⁴¹ Jones disagreed more sharply. He states, "God is not a guarantor of human (and certainly not Christian) well-being. At any rate, the freedom of a disestablished church that we

³⁷ Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 324, 336.

³⁸ See Shurden, ed., *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Bible* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), chs. 6, 10, 14. These essays all affirm a kind of "this is that" final step in interpretation, the need to read Scripture in faithful practices, and even, in the case of chapter 14, states agreement with McClendon's own project.

³⁹ Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 330.

⁴⁰ Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 328. See Everett Goodwin, ed. *Baptists in the Balance: The Tension between Freedom and Responsibility* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1997).

⁴¹ Shurden, "Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 332–34.

enjoy now is not the result of some mysterious supernatural gift but the result of real material, political struggle in history—a struggle in which I am glad to say that Baptists played a key role.”⁴² As Black observed, part of the reaction against the supposedly Anabaptist flavor of the document, the readers of the manifesto saw control over American politics and church polity to be vital to their survival and vocation. For the moderates and liberals, the influence of Niebuhr’s models for “transforming” culture rendered Yoder too isolationist.⁴³ Thus, refusing political power was not only misunderstood but also seen as a retreat.⁴⁴

Whatever the intentions of the other signatories of the Baptifesto were, McClendon saw no problem with Baptists being politically active. McClendon had sent students to support Martin Luther King, Jr., and protested the Vietnam War, so clearly he did not support political isolation. In *Ethics*, while no political system holds a monopoly on the Bible and no political practice can be prioritized over the practices of the church, he wrote that the witness of the church is to promote a basic level of social stability, legal and intellectual integrity, liberty, and tolerated plurality, so that no one is forced by any power to believe disingenuously (I, 237).⁴⁵ Thus, this objection to the Baptifesto, as far as McClendon’s thought is concerned, has been misunderstood.

4. *The Baptifesto was too “catholic.”* The Baptifesto called for baptism, communion and preaching to be understood as “powerful signs”—not mere symbolism or ritual. Yet, despite the

⁴² Jones, “Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective,” 52.

⁴³ For instance, Black cites Foy Valentine, “Oral Memoirs of Foy Dan Valentine” (Waco: Baylor University Institute for Oral History), 107, in “Kingdom of Priests,” 147–48. Valentine states sharply, “We have never believed in withdrawing from the world. It’s never been our Baptist way to pull back into pietistic enclaves and to speak in unknown tongues or to withdraw from the real world of politics and economics and social issues. The Baptists in England got right in there with Cromwell and kicked the king’s soldiers in the seat and even killed them on occasion. We have, as Baptists, always been interested in helping to run things”.

⁴⁴ Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1988), 20. Scriven argues that the Anabaptist way, far from being isolationist, is the best way to transform culture.

⁴⁵ For a full treatise on this see Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

fact that the document refused to use the language of “sacrament,” some saw the document as too “catholic.” This was perhaps because many of its supporters did in fact support sacramentalism.⁴⁶

As we have seen, for McClendon’s part, he is not a sacramentalist, preferring the language of sign. Nevertheless, as Stanley Fowler has pointed out, Baptists have historically been sacramentalists, so this objection on historical grounds does not stand.⁴⁷ Yet, this is perhaps the least relevant or sustainable objection, given the statements of the Baptifesto and McClendon’s thoughts on the matter.

The writers of the Baptifesto were inspired by their Anabaptist interlocutors, but the Baptifesto is resolutely Baptist. However, the writers did make a mistake with wording their initial statement in contradistinction to the four freedoms Shurden articulates. So, while the statement otherwise stands largely in agreement with historic Baptist convictions, but it did seek, as good Baptist theology should, to revise problematic convictions of a tradition when needed. The Baptifesto took aim at modernistic perversions of Baptist identity, and thus, it simply should not have been so easily rejected.

10.3 Concerns

Here, however, we must state three ongoing concerns in regards to the baptist identity and the future of the Baptists. The first is the nature of particularity and inclusion in the account of who and what the “baptists” are. The second, similarly, is the question of unity in diversity as a larger challenge to the integrity of the fragmented “baptist” tradition(s). These, in turn, raise a third question: What is the relationship of baptists to Catholics and Protestants?

⁴⁶ Black, “Kingdom of Priests,” 26, 161. Cf. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2003).

⁴⁷ See Stanley K. Fowler, *More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

1. *Can McClendon balance “Baptist” particularity and “baptist” inclusion?* Having seen what the complex term “baptist” entails, we might question the appropriateness of this term for the vision as it goes beyond Anabaptists and Baptists. McClendon wanted to be both historically particular as well as inclusive with his term, descriptively accurate while prescribing a way for future generosity. As an Anabaptist, he may be able to do so, but some might find the label “baptist” a bit alienating. Would a Pentecostal, a Methodist, or a Quaker appreciate being called a “baptist”?⁴⁸ Much less a Catholic liberation theologian? Perhaps the term “radical vision” or “free church vision” with a “baptist” emphasis would be more accurate to what McClendon is offering to other Christian communities.

Alternatively, can Baptists afford *not* to adopt something like McClendon’s baptist platform? As we will see in the next chapter, if Landmarkism has been debunked, Baptists need a new way to understand how they are connected to other Christians. Moreover, if Baptists can admit that they are not the only authentic Christians, as most now recognize, Baptists will need a model that understands some kind of inclusive pluralism. This problem does not necessarily mean McClendon’s baptist identity is the preferred solution, but the present difficulties with Baptist identity should necessitate at least the consideration of the baptist model.

2. *Does McClendon’s account of diversity in baptist churches properly explain its division?* Given that McClendon seeks to be particular yet inclusive within a free-church ecclesiology that we have already sketched out in brief, the free-church ecclesiology is, for many, inherently fragmented and divided, not merely diverse, and much less unified. How can “baptists,” as well as all free-church Christians, claim to be a part of the one holy catholic church? This question of catholicity is pertinent and will be taken up next chapter as a vital

⁴⁸ One Pentecostal/Methodist reaction looks at how McClendon does not explicitly state a Wesleyan quadrilateral, and therefore Methodists do not neatly fit into the “baptist” identity. See Amos Yong, *The Dialogical Spirit* (Cambridge: James Clark, 2015), 109.

question for McClendon's theological program.

3. *How is the baptist identity connected to Catholics and Protestants?* We have already discussed McClendon's relationship to other Baptists that do not agree with him or share his love of the Anabaptist connection. So, we will posit the larger ecumenical problem here. While McClendon argues for an approach that is "neither Protestant nor Catholic," he draws heavily from both these groups at times, while attempting to remain distinct. Similarly, while the Anabaptists considered themselves distinct from the Reformers and the Reformers distinct from the Anabaptists, they influenced each other heavily in both directions.⁴⁹ Both, in turn, assumed much from the Catholicism of their day. Baptists are a heterogeneous mixture of influences and convictions seeking an overall vision. How distinct can these identities be if they are often intertwined? This begs yet another question: how does McClendon's approach contribute to ecumenical reconciliation (which he advocates for) when it seeks to set up a type that tries to be inclusive yet assumes new lines of distinction?

Thus, from these three questions (particularity in inclusion, unity in diversity, distinctiveness and ecumenism), the issue of catholicity rises in importance.

10.4 Conclusion

The baptist vision is a form of typological reading, but all reading is historically and socially situated. In attempting to define fully the term "baptist" in his historical and social context, we see that for McClendon, this means his context of Southern Baptist moderate and Anabaptist; it pertains to all free or believer's churches and radical Christians in general. McClendon proposes the "baptist" identity to bring these groups together.

⁴⁹ See William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), chap. 8. This is also easily apparent in the different resemblances in confessional statements; see Lumpkin and Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*.

The baptist vision attempts to offer a platform for renewal in Southern Baptist life as advocated in the Baptist Manifesto (or “Baptifesto”) but some, for several reasons, rejected it. We have analyzed these complex reasons, and when we grounded the manifesto in McClendon’s thoughts, we observed that most of the objections to it were actually misunderstandings. However, the most significant one is the Anabaptist connection: some felt that this was an attempt to make Baptists into Anabaptists. While McClendon adopted some Anabaptist convictions, it was under the basis of present convictions in need of revision. The ones he was recommending were biblical and would help Baptists be more Christ-like in their witness—two things that should be more important to Baptists than being “Baptist.” Moreover, however, none of the convictions of the Baptifesto were unoriginal to Baptists, as Freeman shows.

McClendon’s “baptist” model (along with its catholic sensibilities, which we will explore shortly), does offer a model of generous inclusion, but only to those willing to embrace it. Baptists need changing, whether they are willing to change (or even to acknowledge the need for change!) or not. While Black sees the unpopularity of the document as understandable, he concludes in favor of the “Baptifesto,” and agrees that its prescriptions are in fact necessary for the survival of all Baptists:

In other words, while some Baptists may continue to insist that “we have never been Anabaptist,” the various challenges the *Baptifesto* raised, while not solely indebted to Anabaptist, ‘radical reformation,’ or believers’ church influences, are indeed part of what could be described as a family quarrel. At the very least, intellectually-honest Baptists cannot summarily dismiss the statement as an attempt at subversion by crypto-Catholics who have adopted convictions alien to the Baptist heritage. In the end, it would be tragic if the substantive concerns the statement raised about privatized religion and the churches’ cultural captivity in America were lost or distorted amid the still-reverberating shouts of the recent Southern Baptist civil war. The quarrel over Baptist identity can only avoid a permanent descent into the swift and mutual condemnations of so much contemporary political discourse by recognizing that there is much more in heaven and earth than dreamt of in the philosophies of late-twentieth-century (Southern) Baptist politics or the calcified (yet likely fading) liberal-conservative camps of American

Christianity.⁵⁰

Does all this misunderstanding invalidate the baptist vision? While McClendon's proposal had not received widespread acceptance at the time of his death, the intellectual veracity and generous intention of his theology hopefully will provide it with a lasting legacy in baptist life. McClendon's ecclesial proposal, which accompanies the vision, attempts to balance between being particular and accurate to a certain ecclesial tradition on the one side, while also being inclusive and prescriptive on the other. While this raises many questions, to the point that some might still see the historical "baptist" element in the baptist vision as too complex and precarious, it in many ways makes the need for "vision" all the more necessary.

⁵⁰ Black, "Kingdom of Priests," 161–62.

Chapter 11: Isn't "Baptist-Catholicity" an Oxymoron?

"[We believe] that though in respect of Christ, the Church be one, Ephes. 4.4. yet it consists of diverse particular congregations, even so many as there shall be in the world, every of which congregation, though they be but two or three, have Christ given them, with all the means of their salvation."

- John Smyth¹

What claim do baptists have to representing or reflecting the whole Church? After all, baptists are relative latecomers to the Christian world, being only about 500 years old. Baptists are quite diverse, even more divided than they are diverse, and prone to extremes of liberalism and fundamentalism. So, the objection might be that the baptist identity is inherently prone to fads and novelty, division and fragmentation, lacking both historical rootedness and the capacity to reflect the universality and wholeness of the faith that older traditions possess. In short, by one definition, baptist theology lacks valid "catholicity" (a term we will now have to define). Thus far we have explored the nature of the baptist vision ("this is that"), its accompanying distinctives, and reading with a special eye for the literary structures of the biblical text in order to construct doctrine that achieves Christ-like action. We have argued for a productive integration in McClendon's thought of the baptist vision and narrative theology—that the two are interdependent and self-enriching—but, as we have been seeing, the baptist identity is an unstable one. An essential question of the integrity of baptist identity is whether baptists can claim catholicity in their sense of tradition, whether baptist identity can make a claim in its diversity and fragmentation to that which is timeless or universal about Christian faith. That said, reading, in the baptist vision, entails an attentiveness to how other Christians have read Scripture, whether now or in the past. Because of this, McClendon asserts that it is through the baptist vision of "this is that" and its communal practices that baptists are able to claim a connection to

¹ John Smyth was the first General Baptist. Quotation found in H. Leon McBeth, ed., *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 40.

the past and a type of catholicity for themselves, one that also critically applies and assesses tradition. Following McClendon's assertion, we will access the nature of the baptist vision as a means to claiming catholicity and as a means of understanding tradition.

First, we will investigate the nature of the term "catholic" in more depth. McClendon offers three senses of the term in order to clarify the discussion as to how Catholics, Protestants, and baptists all claim to be "catholic." Second, we will survey McClendon's proposal for catholicity (which he wrote with John Howard Yoder), which sees the vision as the means by which catholicity is claimed.² After this, we will investigate a baptist view of tradition that McClendon offers.

11.1 What Is "Catholicity"?

To define catholicity, we will begin with McClendon's more basic definition, then expand it in order to provide the required concepts needed to critique McClendon's (as well as other) proposals of "baptist catholicity."

The word "catholic" (Gk.: *katholikos*) is not used in the New Testament and simply means "the whole or complete" (III, 334). Citing the important 1947 study, *Catholicity*,³ McClendon argues that "catholic" was first used in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (approx. 155 A.D.),⁴ where the term meant "to embody a way of life—its beliefs, its worship, its morals" (III, 334).

² McClendon's proposal shares affinity with the proposal by his friend and colleague Curtis Freeman, and bears remarkable similarity to Volf's more technical definition of catholicity for a free church ecclesiology. Thus, these proposals will be discussed as supplements and supports of McClendon's. See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Curtis Freeman, "A Confession for Catholic baptists," in *Ties that Bind*, ed. Gary A. Furr and Curtis Freeman (Macon: Smith & Helwys, 1994); and Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor, 2014).

³ Abbot E. S. et al., *Catholicity: A Study in the Conflict in Christian Traditions in the West* (Westminster: Dacre, 1947).

⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1; 8.1; 16.2, in *Early Christian Writings*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin Books, 1987). These uses refer to the "whole Catholic Church in x region" which implies neither numerical nor

This basic definition has some problems. Although McClendon uses the 1947 study for his definition, it is a highly instrumental usage, as this study on the primitive character of the church yields a very different ecclesial description than McClendon's ecclesiology. The church of the second century was very different from the church of the first century, having priests, a more hierarchical arrangement of bishops, different creedal material, etc.⁵ McClendon does not seem to approve of any of these. This creates a challenge we will explore later.

Also, McClendon oddly neglects the fact that the word "catholic" is used before the *Martyrdom*. Ignatius in 100 A.D. used it; his usage is directly linked to the presence of the bishop. In Ignatius' attempt to curb heresy, he encourages his congregation to cling to the bishop as representing Christ to the congregation, and "where Christ is," he says, "there is the 'catholic' church."⁶ Miroslav Volf argues that this term seems to have acquired "a geographic meaning (unity in spatial and cultural universality) which was then quickly associated with the notion of correct faith." However, the term "serves to designate the church in its totality."⁷ Thus, catholicity seems to refer to all the saints everywhere as well as some body of doctrine held by all Christians, whose vehicle involves the episcopate. Through this, Avery Dulles notes then that this catholicity entails orthodoxy (correct doctrine) as opposed to heresy.⁸ Dulles goes further to define catholicity as entailing universality of expression (i.e., particularity is suspect).

Nevertheless, McClendon clarifies three (somewhat interrelated) senses, which approximately correspond to these insights:⁹ (1) Catholic means being "whole" or "well-rounded" in character, fully obedient to Christ. A church or a person is catholic if they are, in

geographic totality (or else "whole" would be a redundant adjective). Also, the word is used to describe both individual and congregation, implying "Catholic" meant certain qualities that demarcate them as such.

⁵ See James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 2006).

⁶ *Letter to Smyrna* 8, in *Early Christian Writings*, 103.

⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 265.

⁸ Avery Dulles, *Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 185.

⁹ This is proposed in McClendon and John Howard Yoder, "Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Summer 1990): 562–63.

worship, theology, and practice, following Christ.¹⁰ This is a catholicity of *authenticity* (catholic_a). Again, McClendon's strategy for catholicity does claim this, but in a different way than how the term was used in the second century. As we will see, for McClendon, catholicity in this sense can be contextual and situation-specific, changing from era to era, where other, more Catholic (big "C") approaches argue for timeless expression. (2) Catholic means the whole church, fully inclusive of all true believers and churches everywhere.¹¹ This is a catholicity of *universality in scope* (catholic_u). McClendon wrote in 1968 that ecumenism comes with the conviction that "the grace of God [is] in places other than our place, in persons other than ourselves, in churches other than our churches."¹² To be catholic in this sense is to intuit and acknowledge the full scope of all believers everywhere. (3) Catholic means a distinct institution or party, namely the Catholic Church or Orthodox Church, or even the Landmark Baptists, who claim unbroken or recovered apostolic succession. This is catholicity by *party* (catholic_p).

McClendon notes that many see catholicity_p as the official strategy for acquiring catholicity_u, which is the case for many Catholics and Protestants. Thus, in this discussion, catholicity becomes a debate about interpretations of which *party* is able to claim the purest historical trajectory, whether in an argument over the origin of the *filioque* clause between Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox, or over the Trail of Blood theology of fundamentalist Baptists.¹³

¹⁰ McClendon cites the term as used *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.2, 16.2, although we have already discussed the issues with this usage. Nevertheless, as John Meyendorff writes in *Catholicity and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1983): "What he [Ignatius] meant to proclaim is the fullness and the universality of salvation revealed in Christ within the Church.... According to St. Ignatius, the 'catholic' Church was that Christian assembly which had accepted the whole of the divine presence in Christ, the whole truth, the fullness of life, and had assumed a mission directed at the salvation of the whole of God's creation.... 'Catholicity' was a sign of the presence of Christ, and Christ, in His Word and in the mystery of the Eucharist, was present 'wherever two or three' were gathered in His name, in each local community of Christians" (7).

¹¹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 265, as noted above: "the term catholicity acquired very early a geographic meaning (unity in a spatial and cultural universality) which was then quickly associated with the notion of correct faith."

¹² McClendon, "What is a Southern Baptist Ecumenism?" *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 10 (Spring 1968): 73.

¹³ McClendon does not interact with Greek Orthodox claims as different from Roman Catholic.

The Roman Catholic version inevitably sees catholicity comprised of a believer or church in institutional identification, namely tangible communion, to the Roman See. This version of catholicity entails (1) creedal profession, (2) correctly administered sacraments, in particular the Eucharist, by a priest under a bishop that claims (3) his office via apostolic succession, and in particular, communion with whomever holds the office of Peter.¹⁴

For McClendon, this means Roman Catholics (and other high church traditions) cannot recognize their own particularity (I, 35): Roman Catholicism is still very *Roman*, Greek Orthodoxy still insurmountably *Greek*, etc.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the claim to universality makes these traditions resistant to necessary reform, whatever that may be, that could allow them at the very least to achieve the unity desired with other recognizable, true believers. In other words, from McClendon's viewpoint, for churches that claim to be exclusively the one Catholic Church today—while such a claim was effective for curbing heresy in the second century—in a post-Christendom age of such evident brokenness in the Church, such a claim could function to create a situation of rivalry amongst different groups that might, otherwise, intuitively recognize each other.

However, McClendon neglects to admit that for devout Catholics, their way of being Catholic is a way of being catholic_a. If, as we go on to note some of the further conundrums of McClendon's taxonomy, we should find that he is serious about renouncing unhelpful claims to superiority, then he cannot discount the fact that while modern Roman Catholicism (despite his

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997), sect. 830.

¹⁵ Volf shares this criticism and states it a bit more sternly in *After Our Likeness*, 261: "According to Free Church argumentation, the Catholic (implicitly also the Orthodox) Church refuses to accept its own particularity [i.e., the Roman Church is contextually Latin, the Greek contextually Greek], and thus denies (full?) catholicity to other churches. This sort of exclusive claim to catholicity is from the Free Church perceptive narrow, intolerant, and thus profoundly uncatholic. To be catholic, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches would have to understand themselves as churches among other churches."

objections) has produced some wonderful saints, so also have baptist convictions produced negative results at times.

Baptists also used a similar institutional strategy to argue for a purity of origin, suggesting that they constitute a pure continuity from the apostolic pattern, often called Landmarkism or the “Trail of Blood” theology. While many Baptist and Anabaptist theologians have articulated this conviction, J. M. Carroll devised the most popular version of this in the last century.¹⁶ This theology argued that Baptists began with John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostles, forming an unbroken succession of a repressed true church through history, leading to the full manifestation of the Baptist movement. As the classic Baptist hymn proclaims,

Not at the River Jordan, but at a flowing stream
 Stood John the Baptist preacher when he baptized Him.
 John was a Baptist preacher when he baptized the Lamb;
 Then Jesus was a Baptist, and thus the Baptists came.¹⁷

This historiography, however, has been thoroughly disproven, as much of Carroll’s argument assumed a historical link between various, condemned heretical groups (such as Donatists and Albigensians) all the way to the Waldenses and the Anabaptists, links which simply did not exist.¹⁸ These groups shared little sociological connection and their theological convictions were often vastly different.

The second way baptists have insisted on a kind of party catholicity is not by pure historical continuity per se, but by a purity of recovered pattern. The former requiring a historical

¹⁶ See the original argument in J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood* (Lexington: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931). While the book cites several secondary historical studies and offers a highly coherent and rigorous argument, this work virtually does not interact with any primary sources for its historiographical claims on the “trail of blood” through the centuries.

¹⁷ Rev. Starke Dupuy, *Baptist Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, 2nd ed. (Frankfort, Ky.: David Niess, Jr., 1812) quoted in Donald Durnbaugh, in “Free Churches, Baptists, and Ecumenism: Origins and Implications,” in *Baptists and Ecumenism*, William Boney and Glenn A. Igleheart, eds. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1979), 9.

¹⁸ For a refutation of successionism see James McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1999).

argument for continuity, the latter is merely the claim that ever since a given event in which the church is perceived to have “fallen,” there has been then no true church until it was subsequently recovered.¹⁹ This is most often asserted in relation to the Emperor Constantine.²⁰ McClendon, however, has revised this notion in two ways: (1) by insisting that there were *missteps* (the Constantinian shift, the separation of Christianity from Judaism, etc.) but no total *fall* of the church (I, 55)²¹ and (2) by arguing that baptists comprise a *contested identity* within the whole church, possessing different emphases that they feel best equip them for serving Christ (II, 25, 109). Baptists should not claim to be the true church over against others, but rather should claim to be another mode within the Church.

McClendon sees the “Protestant strategy” as aiming for a similar objective, asserting its own universality through the group’s purity of doctrine rather than directly through the institution itself.²² McClendon cites Barth (II, 42) and Tillich (II, 338) as examples of this mentality. Baptists (big “B”) have used these typically Protestant strategies, arguing for Baptist doctrine over others. However, if other Protestants agree with Baptists on scriptural authority, any claims to superiority (or the potential accusation of apostasy toward those that differ)

¹⁹ This is similar to the view of Franklin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Starr King, 1952).

²⁰ This is said while noting that there is a current debate over the Constantinian “fall” and its meaning and repercussions. See Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010). Leithart’s thesis has attempted, at least implicitly, to disprove the Anabaptist thesis of a Constantinian fall by noting the authenticity of Constantine’s faith and conviction, as well as the mutual recognition of his ideas among Christians at the time. However, as the answering volume of essays has shown, Yoder’s understanding of a Constantinian fall never sees the fall in Constantine himself. Rather, the fall was a *process* that occurred over the next several hundred years, with Constantine, in opening the door to the slippage, merely being a kind of symbolic marker. See John Roth, ed., *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013). For Yoder’s notion of a Constantinian fall, see Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), chap. 7. Also cf. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood* (Waterloo: Herald, 1998), chaps. 1 & 11.

²¹ Freeman sees this as one of McClendon’s most important revisions to baptist identity, in Freeman’s *Contesting Catholicity*, 10.

²² For a similar account of catholicity, see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2015). Allen and Swain recommend reading Scripture with tradition, particularly the creeds. The authors defend proof-texting which seems similar to the baptist vision, albeit less sophisticated.

become question-begging: “what separated the Anabaptists from their persecutors was not merely the courage to draw an inference!” (I, 28). The claim to be “the true church” via doctrinal purity and precision, whether it is staked by baptists or other Christians, fails to recognize *all* believers, as it also fails to think through deeper questions of the phenomena of the plurality of doctrine.

Thus, Catholic_p claims its party’s correctness to the exclusion to all others, and insofar as Catholics, Protestants, and Baptists have used these strategies, they have fallen short of a full, inclusive account of all believers everywhere. As the *Catholicity* report of 1947 announces,

In our divided Christendom we do not believe that any existing institution or group of institutions gives a full and balanced representation of the true and primitive Catholicity. It is the recovery of the principles of that Catholicity that is our quest.²³

Echoing the words of the *Catholicity* report, McClendon insists that Christianity does not have a unified account of catholicity today, only particular and competing versions (II, 43). Catholicity, as asserted and defined differently by each tradition of Christianity, therefore becomes an inherently contested concept (III, 338), possibly fragmenting Christianity further. McClendon was profoundly aware of this:

Who can recite the great unity passages such as Ephesians 4:5, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism,” without being reminded of the historical reality: A thousand warring sects, schism and heresy, division and excommunication, all justified in the name of the aforesaid one Lord. And if someone sees in this variety and struggle no great scandal but instead a healthy living diversity of religion; or if someone claims to see here and there in the diversity some true Christian essence now and again appearing; or if someone claims by whatever means to discern amidst the variety some true path of historic faithfulness, some True Church, with other paths relegated to heterodoxy; or if someone sees the great variety of ways grouped according to a few main types, each bearing witness to a part of the Christian truth but no type witnessing to all the truth—in each case the main difficulty remains. (I, 18)

²³ Abbot E. S. et al., *Catholicity*, 9–10.

Thus, McClendon recommends that for baptists the best way to claim “catholicity” is by renouncing arrogant claims to superiority, recognizing the goodness of multiplicity of expression, and working toward tangible practices of unity (particular to each context).²⁴

The discovery that the Christian gospel in history has never been limited to one universal (or as some say, “catholic”) community of followers, but has truly appeared in multiple branches or streams, may distress even the open-minded adherent of any one such stream. Of these several streams of Christian life, the baptist stream is only one. (BR, 2)

If full, tangible catholicity_u does not presently exist (or at least not a universally agreed-upon one) and there is no obvious strategy for achieving total inclusion (III, 336), McClendon’s alternative is to offer a version of catholic_a that will hopefully seek Christ-like character for its church members in a given local context, and also a cooperative and constructive way of relating to other Christians, one that does not breed exclusion and superiority, but certainly does not adopt an uncritical pluralism, either.

Given McClendon’s explanation of the meaning of “catholicity” and the problem inherent to claims based on either party or purity, we can observe that McClendon refocuses catholicity towards the taking up of Christ-like character within one’s community and Christ-like treatment of those who are in other Christian communities.

11.2 What Is “baptist Catholicity”?

A baptist version of catholicity is different from Protestant or Catholic strategies. McClendon writes, “There is still another approach to the essence of Christianity. This communitarian approach finds that essence in no hierarchical body or single theological tradition, but in the faithful church, where ‘church’ (*ekklēsia*, *koinōnia*) means first of all

²⁴ For an argument that affirms the goodness of multiplicity of expression, see James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). Smith thinks through a “creational hermeneutic” where plurality of interpretation is constitutive of the goodness of one’s created nature. There are considerable differences between the first and second edition, as Smith supplemented his more charismatic pluralism with a recovered creedalism in the second edition.

congregation, local assembly of disciples” (II, 42). Catholicity means the taking up of a local-context, Christ-like character, and for baptists this is done through the baptist vision and its communal practices. First we will look at how a local baptist church is connected to Christ’s universality (and is thus catholic), and second, we will examine the way in which a baptist church takes up the fullness of this radical catholicity.

First, as we observed earlier, catholicity has a spatial dimension, which connects the church to its origin, its current calling, and its future. In other words, catholicity involves the practices of the baptist vision, which mystically connect a church to Christ, obediently responding to the Gospel, living distinct from the world, awaiting his return: “the present church is the primitive church and the church on judgment day” (I, 30).

For the baptist vision, catholicity is a strategy, contextualized and tentative, that links a conviction to its past origin (Jesus of Nazareth) by taking up both present obedience to Christ and present expression of the Spirit’s gifts in a church. This therefore warrants its universality in principle, since it is connected with Christ’s universality. It is linked to the past, but not necessarily by organizational structures, traditions, or doctrinal statements, as it sees revision and innovation as part of the ongoing task of faithfulness. To be “catholic” in the present sense is always to take up the “fullness of Christ” (Eph. 3:19). Catholicity then is the local manifestation of the omnipresent Christ, making visible the fullness of salvation and Christ-like character in a church by the gifts of the Spirit.

Compared to other Christian versions, this has different contextual implications for baptists. In comparison to, for instance, Dulles’ characterization of catholicity, both he and McClendon root catholicity in this fullness of Christ,²⁵ yet Dulles argues for a timeless, ecclesial

²⁵ Dulles, *Catholicity of the Church*, chaps. 2–5. In Ephesians, the “fullness” of salvation is linked to the fullness of God in Christ who “fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23) and is one with the Father who is “above all and through all and in

expression, regardless of geography and culture. Meanwhile, McClendon denies that the universality of Christ in all ecclesial places is at all undermined by diverse, localized expressions.

How are all the diverse fractions of Christianity unified, then? McClendon offers two possibilities: an invisible, “mystical” union (II, 43) or his communitarian approach. The “mystical” approach assumes a spiritual unity in incommensurable diversity. This, for McClendon, is highly abstract and disembodied, often dismissing the particularity of a community and the very practices that make it such. While this is a popular possibility, McClendon prefers a communitarian approach of inclusivity, an ongoing process of scriptural reflection, and hospitality, building partnerships off of tangible practices and convictions.²⁶ At this point it is worth citing McClendon at length for his own words and heart on the matter:

Thus, the other option: The pattern and structure of church life are not entirely ‘adiaphora,’ matters indifferent. Although this pattern does not decree (for all time) whether deacons are to be ordained, or how churches are to organize for mission, or whether or not bread turns into something else in the Lord’s supper, it does nonetheless give backbone to ordinary, authentic, catholic Christian existence—an existence in which such issues as these will certainly arise and be settled, though their one-time settlement will not absolve future Christian generations from confronting them afresh in relation to the practices (teaching, Bible study, evangelism, charity, and the like) that identify the church. This communitarian view does not simply dismiss the claims of other Christian movements than our own to be truly evangelical, truly catholic, truly faithful—qualities that we would wish for ourselves *and* for them. (It does not arbitrarily *include* the others, either). As noted above, the “practical” view is contestable and when properly understood will inevitably be contested. The business of the present volume is to make clear this view of authentic

all” (Eph. 4:6). Christ equips his church to be “worthy of the calling...with all humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3). Christ gives gifts for this fullness, namely to those that work as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:11) “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

²⁶ McClendon seems to speak of the “mystical” unity approach and the communitarian approach as distinct and possibly mutually exclusive. It might be better to think of them as mutually complementary: as one has a conviction that there are true believers in other communities, this leads a community to partner in unity rather than to remain separate. After all, a part of this sounds similar to the conviction he had years earlier: “the grace of God [is] in places other than our place, in persons other than ourselves, in churches other than our churches.” See McClendon, “What is a Southern Baptist Ecumenism?” 73.

Christianity. It can be rejected or (as I would hope) accepted. One of the tests of its authenticity is whether it can be proposed in a spirit of love that will win friends, not enemies, for the good news it seeks to represent. (II, 43–44)

This also gives catholicity an eschatological orientation. “Christian unity is a future goal, not a reality lost in the past” (III, 334). By reorienting authentic catholicity toward holistic Christ-like character in a given context, rather than adherence to historic paradigms, McClendon shifts catholicity from looking at a broken past to new practices that anticipate a future point of new unity.²⁷ The question changes from who can theoretically claim the most pure lineage, to how are Christian churches going to act and change in a way that best obeys the command of Christ to be unified with fellow believers? The answer: “That they may be one as we are one” (John 17:22). McClendon is not specific about what these practices are, since they will be different from community to community, but we can imagine that a baptist view of these practices would fit into the list of Biblicism (shared engagement with Scripture), liberty (extended and advocated), discipleship (partnering for the mutual goal of making mature disciples in both traditions), community (enjoying fellowship with each other), and witness (working in mission with each other).

Second, this baptist version of catholicity is then oriented towards taking up practices of obedience in the church. For the baptist vision, this is not done necessarily by either hierarchical organization or by trying to recover one complete body of pristine theology, but by contextual practices that aim at the fullness of Christ. It is done through the baptist vision of hearing the

²⁷ On an eschatologically oriented catholicity, see Volf, *After Our Likeness*: “The catholicity of the entire people of God is the ecclesial dimension of the eschatological fullness of salvation for the entirety of created reality” (267). Further: “The church is catholic because the Spirit of the new creation present within it anticipates in it the eschatological gathering of the whole people of God” (268). Also, Volf states, “Within history, each church is catholic insofar as it always reflects its full eschatological catholicity historically only in a broken fashion. This is why no church can claim full catholicity for itself” (268).

Word of God in the present, tentatively and fallibly, in a “this is that” manner (which we have earlier sketched out).

The local community is called to preach and to discern these prophetic readings (1 Cor. 14:26–32). Within these communal practices, believers must assemble in the name of Christ, as where “two or three are gathered,” Christ is present (Matt. 18:20). There is no guarantee of, or even a need for, uniformity: “It must be understood that the baptist vision allows a variety of Bible readings, a variety of applications, depending on time and place and, of course, on the individuality of the readers of Scripture in each time and place” (II, 46). Yet in this very assembly is the Spirit’s gifting, which equips the community to “bind and loose” (III, 379, cf. Matt. 16:19), and it is here that the appropriate interpretations and applications are bound for the congregation to follow in any given context.²⁸

Each [theological voice] is to be heard and weighed, and none is to be silenced or privileged. In this process the Spirit moves the conversation in the direction of the Gospel. Such a practice allows for diversity while seeking unity. It encourages dissent but desires consensus. It does not permit one voice to silence the speech of others or to ventriloquize them by making them speak words not of their own uttering. Its goal is to display the mind of Christ and to speak the common language of the Spirit. (BR, 9)

This process of discernment has caused baptists to take up important practices like Biblicism, liberty, discipleship, community, and witness, which, McClendon argues, citing Yoder (III, 378–79), involves convictions like the Rule of Christ (that is, the law of love), the Lord’s Supper, practicing the New Humanity (in other words, reconciliation), congregational polity, the Rule of

²⁸ We should note that the power to “bind and loose” is given expressly to *Peter* in Matt. 16:19. Nigel Wright argues that Peter, “the Rock,” is a type for any faithful (albeit imperfect) disciple. See Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 9.

Paul (that is, “all present should be free to take the floor,” and then the voice of God is discerned, cf. 1 Cor. 14:26–32), etc.²⁹

This approach allows for plurality in different contexts as a community discerns the appropriate practices and bonds of unity it is called to embody, in order to achieve the fullness of Christ. As we remember, in the baptist vision a true interpretation is one that leads to Christ-like action (II, 73, quoting Rothmann), and in particular, Christ-like treatment of other Christians, especially those whom baptists differ from. This for McClendon entails the pragmatic criterion that will hopefully bear fruit (cf. Luke 6:44):

Our critics may worry that such a discussion would quickly devolve into the strife of interests: one more multicultural cacophony, a theological Babel. [...] Our aim is to practice a hermeneutics of peoplehood that reaches out to all people, especially those in the margins, without privileging any voice from the outset. And if the Spirit is in our conversation it is yet possible that from the many voices there will emerge, not a Babel, but a symphony, a theological Pentecost. (BR, 9)

While all the factions of Christianity will continue to deliberate on the meaning of certain passages and terms (catholicity being one of them, ironically!), McClendon recommends a peaceable inclusivism, treating other Christians in the spirit of love. McClendon’s hope is that by recognizing the fallibility and situated-ness of baptist theological claims, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) may be produced in ecumenical efforts.

Now neither romantics nor realists have so far shown the others’ path to be impossible or irrelevant, and obviously neither has shown itself so clearly to be the true path that the other side has closed business of its own accord. Our pragmatic suggestion, as lovers of peace and despisers of violence, is that we continue to reason together but that, meanwhile, we each allow the other way to flourish alongside our own way, waiting to see which will in the long run lead to the mutually recognized goal. We ask of those who believe the other way is better only that they refrain from crowding our way out of the one earth upon which

²⁹ McClendon cites Yoder in III, 378 on this matter, as offering a communal description similar to his. See Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ: Paul’s Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin: Brethren, 1987).

we both must live. If the other way agrees to this kind of openness, it has already come closer to our own.³⁰

Concerns: With what McClendon sees as a baptist version of catholicity stated, several concerns and implications should be noted:

1. *McClendon's definition of catholicity is unconventional.* By offering the several nuances of the term "catholic," McClendon speaks about a character-based catholicity that baptists possess that is very different from the character of second-century Christianity, where the term arose. It appears obvious that McClendon, with many other baptists, reads Scripture in a tradition, but tradition must be read critically along with Scripture. Yet, as McClendon is not a Biblicist or a traditionalist, the notion that he can re-appropriate traditional terms like "catholic" (or "baptist," for that matter) without clinging to historic forms too tightly is perhaps not impossible in his mind.

2. *McClendon's definition of catholicity puts plurality, inclusion, and contestation in tension.* McClendon goes on to say that not all forms of catholicity are available today in a fragmented state of Christianity. He prescribes one that is character-based and constructively works towards affirming all true believers everywhere. This is obviously not compatible with Roman Catholic or Orthodox versions, so the claim that no one has complete catholicity, while claiming to adopt catholicity without claims to superiority over other traditions, ironically, still makes a claim to superiority. Can one be a Congregationalist or a non-creedalists without seeing a more hierarchical structure of authority as "wrong" (especially since one set of convictions historically was predicated on the corrupt nature of the other)? The implication of difference without denouncement is by no means an easy one. For McClendon's part, he is sincere about a generous inclusivism that works to construct partnerships despite differences.

³⁰ Yoder and McClendon, "Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective," 579–80.

3. McClendon's definition dissolves the problem of catholicity for baptists in principle, but the challenge in reality remains. Baptists remain a highly fragmented and divided group. However, this does not make larger traditions preferable as they are apart of this fragmentation as well. The question then becomes, what revisions to baptist ecclesiology are necessary to promote increasing unity?

McClendon still insists on re-baptism for those who have not undergone believer's baptism. He sees it as a baptism not of conversion but "repair" (II, 396). Yet other baptists, including Curtis Freeman, are insisting on ending the practice if a person comes from a non-immersion tradition yet has been confirmed and shows Christ-like character.³¹ Freeman thinks this is the better path towards encouraging unity.

This reality of fragmentation, as we will see, is both a problem for McClendon as baptists are fragmented, but also a reality that, since he is in tune with, makes his proposal attractive. While some like Jeffrey Cary seek to recall churches to more rigid senses of authority, communion that seem similar to McClendon's party Catholicism type,³² McClendon focuses on the recognition that no one has true catholicity in the fullest sense today. While other traditions recede into their own notions of communion, ignoring the very real divisions within, claiming a sense of superiority over other churches, McClendon's own work to decenter a baptist sense of superiority and attempt to focus on grass-roots initiatives of practices of unity seem like a productive step forward in the work of ecumenism.

Thus, McClendon's version of catholicity does not look to doctrinal statements or organizational structures for legitimation, but from the taking up of a localized call to obedience

³¹ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 383.

³² See Jeffery Cary, *Free Churches and the Body of Christ* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012), ch. 5, especially, pg. 191.

to whatever the Spirit is commanding. All four of these concerns we stated necessitate a closer discussion on the nature and function of tradition in baptist theology, to which we now turn.

11.3 A baptist Theology of Tradition

McClendon, compared to what we might posit as the “average” baptist, has a generous place for tradition, but one that includes revision.³³ Tradition is the vehicle in which Scripture is passed along. However, tradition is fallible, cannot add to what Scripture says in any definitive way, and can be corrected by Scripture if it becomes problematic. We will suggest that recovering a fuller sense of tradition is necessary for baptists to lay claim to catholicity.

1. *Tradition is the vehicle that transmits Scripture.* The Apostles saw what they were writing as something they passed on, or “traditioned,” to their followers. Paul writes, “First and foremost, I handed on to you the tradition I have received: that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). So, “such tradition undergirds and does not rival the Bible” (II, 469).

2. *Traditions, as examples of the past, function as “trail-markers” and as aids for the journey.* They function like “monuments” (II, 471, borrowing Yves Congar’s term), “trail-marks that indicate where the people of God have been on their journey through time. In this sense they tell us how Scripture has been (then and there) read, and invite us to read it that way if we can”

³³ This chapter of this dissertation can be seen as a rebuttal to the criticisms of Tilley, McClendon’s former student, who sees McClendon’s work as too much of a “pure intratextualism.” Pure intratextualism neglects all the resources of the past and present to read the text through, restricting meaning within the biblical text, and not seeing the legitimacy of meanings that occur from interaction between the biblical text and the texts of tradition. See Terrence W. Tilley, “Incommensurability, Intratextuality, and Fideism,” *Modern Theology* 5 (January 1989): 87–111. Similarly, this chapter might also be seen as an engagement with Layman, who insisted that the baptist vision bypasses history, a claim McClendon denied in both theory (I, 32) and practice (seen in his historical readings in every chapter). See David Wayne Layman, “The Inner Ground of Christian Theology: Church, Faith, and Sectarianism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27 (Summer 1990): 480–503. For a historical overview of the rise, decline, and renewal of the place of tradition in theology see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), chap. 4. While no comprehensive comparison will be given here, Grenz’s theology of tradition very much mirrors McClendon’s.

(II, 471). Yet these are “hermeneutical aids and like every reading strategy must remain subordinate to the scriptural texts we hope to read (partly) by their help” (II, 471).

McClendon disagrees with the notion that tradition can form a second source of authority. He sees much of the development of any two-source notion to be indebted to a simple lack of access to Scripture and literacy in it (II, 469). However, he points out that *Dei Verbum* seems to avoid strong language of two distinct sources.³⁴ “Yet if official Catholicism declines to make ‘unwritten tradition’ a supplement and in some sense a rival to Scripture, it makes still less sense for baptists to do so” (II, 470).

3. *Tradition has a present sense.* McClendon expands this definition to describe all action of practicing the faith in time as a part of “tradition.” Citing the *Edinburgh Faith and Order Conference*,

“Tradition” can mean “the living stream of the Church’s life,” now not so much the *content* of Christianity as the process (“traditioning”) by which that content is conveyed to the next generation—a process that includes teaching Scripture, understanding the past, promoting Christian education, preaching the very gospel itself. (II, 470)

4. *All past tradition and present improvisations, revisions, augmentations, etc., are fallible.* This assumption comes out of McClendon’s insistent principle of fallibility: “Even one’s most cherished and tenaciously held convictions may be false and are in principle always subject to rejection, reformulation, improvement, or reformation” (II, 472). With regards to past formulations, such as creeds or confessions,

If, as Catholic and baptist Christians may now agree, Scripture and tradition (now in the sense of 1 Corinthians 15) are not two sources of authority but properly only one, both communities have a key to the role of creeds and confessions of faith as well. These can have no status as *additional* or supplementary authorities. Creeds and confessions cannot

³⁴ This is Dulles’ estimation also, stated in *The Craft of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 97. Also see Dulles, “Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views,” in *The Authoritative Word: Essays on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 250. These estimates might be a bit optimistic, as certain doctrines would be dogma for Catholics that were formed by post-scriptural tradition.

be invoked as witness to a truth that Scripture omits. But they may briefly witness to the truth that is more fully witnessed in Scripture. And indeed, according to their authors, that was the point of the early creeds; their makers always understood them as guides to the reading of Scripture, not as supplements to it. (II, 470)

Thus, McClendon maintains that “Tradition does not monopolize the voice of Scripture” (II, 468).

This implies a kind of critical hermeneutic of tradition, where tradition is not treated as suspect for merely being such but also does allow for revision when needed. This mentality that McClendon assumes seems to allow for convictions that are not explicitly stated in Scripture (but do not contradict it) to be used in aiding a church in living faithfully in a given context, but it also implies the possibility of critical testing of these convictions to see if they do still function to accomplish that purpose. This is discerned not as an act of critical rationalism but in the prophetic leading of the Spirit,³⁵ imitating Jesus’ own attitude toward tradition.³⁶ For McClendon, rich tradition did not prevent the abuses of the Catholic Church; traditions of strong “Bible” knowledge did not prevent the Reformed Church from promoting Apartheid (II, 468) nor his own Southern Baptists from supporting racial segregation. For this reason, McClendon insists on asking, “We cannot correct all excesses Christians have carried out under traditional cover, but we must ask if we ourselves are helpless prisoners of our traditional ways of reading the Bible” (II, 469). It is for this reason that McClendon thinks believers must be open to examining their convictions and exchanging them for something new when necessary (I, 225). The practice of revision, as Stanley Hauerwas remarks, can quickly devolve into the “liberal self...an

³⁵ While McClendon does not cite this, Freeman’s historical work, pointing out that baptists have tended toward reading for “further light,” might be an important supplement. See Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, chap. 7.

³⁶ This is stated in Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), chap. 4.

exemplification of consumer preference.”³⁷ Thus there are dangers in doing so. Much of McClendon’s work with biographies has been to resource and reshape the baptist tradition, maintaining the assumption that it is possible to work within a *tradition of revision*. So, while there are dangers and there have been missteps, in McClendon’s estimate, characteristic of baptist theology as a whole, one might have to revise a tradition in order to be faithful to it.³⁸

Concerns: That being said, McClendon consistently does not appreciate the traditions of the church enough, and so, here we offer this criticism in which baptist tradition needs to be revised not merely with new practices, but by turning back to the resources of church history, namely the interpretive tradition.

As we hinted earlier, an important issue in regards to revision is seen in McClendon’s view of the creeds. McClendon, for his own part, seems to be a non-creedalists, but the issue of the place of the creeds is an important one. McClendon seems critical of Chalcedon, offering his own “two-narrative Christology” instead of a two-natures one. We have also suggested seeking insights from Patristic thinkers in regards to the Trinity. What he is doing is arguably not forsaking the past but taking a step of being faithful to it. In Chapter Five, we showed that he is not as far from a traditional two-natures model as he thought.

While McClendon has emphasized typology and has focused primarily on how the Anabaptists have read typologically, there is nothing preventing him from looking to all of church history and interpretive tradition for insights into a text. Modern scholarship has had a tendency to dismiss ancient church interpretation as pre-critical, but given that McClendon sees

³⁷ For this reason, Hauerwas seems to prefer a more “high church” approach, seeing this as a criticism of McClendon. Stanley Hauerwas, “Reading James McClendon Takes Practice: Lessons in the Craft of Theology,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 15 (1997): 235–50.

³⁸ Grenz and Franke in *Beyond Foundationalism* define tradition as a resource for theology as follows: “The Christian tradition is comprised as historical attempts by the Christian community to explicate and translate faithfully the first order language, symbols, and practices of the Christian faith, arising from the interaction among community, text, and culture, into the various social and cultural contexts in which that community has been situated” (118).

texts as speaking beyond their historical context (as he describes using speech-act theory), the history of how Christians have listened to the Spirit of the text (even those that allegorize, for instance) can and should be considered a meaningful, albeit non-exclusive and fallible, layer to the biblical text.³⁹

Many Baptists have suggested using creeds as an interpretive guides. McClendon's friend and disciple, Freeman, has argued for how baptists can hold to all elements of the Apostles' Creed, in particular even its ecclesial statements.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Steven Harmon has argued for a fuller embrace of the ecumenical creeds and liturgical resources to provide a doctrinal minimum (and hopefully an emotional renewal) in the midst of baptist doctrinal infighting.⁴¹ This is not as foreign to baptist identity as some may think as, for example, General Baptists used the Orthodox Creed (1678)⁴² to organize themselves and delegates gathered at the Baptist World Alliance have recited together the Apostle's Creed since its first meeting.⁴³ Creeds, while fallible for baptists, can serve as trusted summaries for pedagogical purposes and may provide a baseline for theological agreement. If this is done, Baptists will also have to think further about the nature of heresy and orthodoxy to offer a robust sense of orthodoxy.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, both of these proposals are compatible with McClendon's thoughts, and should be taken as supplements to his project.

³⁹ There are many resources available; two examples are D. H. Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) and John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ Freeman, "A Confession for Catholic baptists," in *Ties that Bind*, 83–98.

⁴¹ Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2006). Harmon's work is, for the most part, an argument for the necessity of tradition for theological reflection, which causes him to consider the richness of the older liturgical traditions as a helpful resource. Catholicity here is never defined with the precision McClendon offers.

⁴² See William Lumpkin and Bill Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 2011), 298–347.

⁴³ Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B. & H. Academic, 2015), 214.

⁴⁴ We should note that something like a baptist definition of heresy was offered by Clark Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), ch. 13.

The ultimate challenge to baptist ecclesiology might be this: If a church or a movement of churches is constituted by the free act of the Spirit, speaking and calling individuals into community (as the free-church model of church describes), often historically speaking from another existing one, in response to certain dilemmas, and if this calling is contextual, then it may also be temporary. To truly hold to the fallibility and reformability of all baptist convictions is to consider the possibility that the baptist church of the future might be indistinguishable from past or present forms. This might look like the unconventional gatherings of emergent churches, or for others it might require traits it eschewed in earlier times, resembling older, more formally liturgical traditions.⁴⁵ However, neither nostalgia nor novelty is a virtue in itself. All convictions are to be weighted in the baptist vision with biblical wisdom in a discerning community.

We see that McClendon's argument for baptist catholicity is one that allows baptists to be authentic to what they have felt called to as they follow Christ in specific contexts, but hopefully this does not breed a spirit of superiority or competition against other Christians, and hopefully, too, it allows for humble efforts to build further unity. Thus is predicated on the basis that baptists do have a place for tradition, a connection to the past, albeit a fallible one, and this place for tradition might recommend not just the critical *scrutiny* of the past but also the *reclamation* of the past for future unity.

11.4 Conclusion

Karl Barth once insisted that "A church is catholic or else it is not the Church."⁴⁶ Baptists can and should claim to be "catholic." McClendon uses the baptist vision with its accompanying communal practices to argue for a uniquely baptist version of catholicity in seeking Christ, living

⁴⁵ For an account of catholicity that looks to re-appropriate traditional authorities and liturgical insights, see Carl E., Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *The Catholicity of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. iv/i (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 702.

Scripture, and patterning worship and witness in that vision. However, the practical challenges remain. Baptists are deeply fragmented and further thinking must occur as to the nature of the baptist tradition. This necessitates a deeper look at what a baptist notion of tradition is. While a baptist notion of tradition is one that sees all tradition as fallible, McClendon puts an emphasis on tradition offering resources that will help a church follow Christ. As we pointed out, McClendon only goes so far with this recovery, and it may seem that baptists will have to go further to deepen their own search for authenticity and catholicity.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

Before all time began there was a Story
Told in eternity: rend'ring God's face.
Life of the living God, poured out as glory,
From God's full store granting grace upon grace

Word that was manifest, tangible, sublime,
Off'ring God's story-formed shape to the world:
Curving space, galaxies floating in space-time,
Kingdoms, dominions, earth's history unfurled.

Infinite Deity, radiant, streaming,
Gleaming in darkness, creating new life,
Never the dark that could vanquish that blazing
Brightness of God overwhelming our strife.

Into the world through a human life—Jesus
Comes to his own through his own stand aloof;
We people blind; oh, may God yet forgive us:
Race shelt'ring Deity under its roof!
- James Wm. McClendon, Jr.¹

If we remember, this project's original thesis read like this: The baptist vision is summarized in the short phrase that “this is that, then is now” in Scripture, the “the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day” (I, 30). *The baptist vision, as the most important theme in McClendon's theology, refers to both the way that the biblical narrative is meaningful today and a particular way baptists have identified themselves in that story. These two aspects, while distinct, are mutually dependent and enriching in McClendon's theology, which is displayed in productive reflection on theological and ecclesial issues.*

The Bible displays literary genres that recommend literary tools to read it, whether typology, metaphor, grammar, speech-act theory, etc. It is the baptist commitment (although not exclusively a baptist commitment) that Scripture continues to speak, to be heard in a free-church

¹ II, 323.

community with all its practices, all with the possibly of new ways of being faithful to Christ emerging. As we saw, not all issues that baptist churches face have been resolved here and not all narrative options have been exhausted. However, a praiseworthy attempt to state and revise doctrine in a baptist mode has been offered, one that any theologian would profit from studying.

12.1 Chapter Review

This research project investigated the many forms the baptist vision takes in McClendon's work. The baptist vision is both an employment of narrative theology, bringing a set of literary tools and insights to bear on doctrinal problems and biblical texts, as well as a set of ecclesial convictions related to who Baptists (and more broadly "baptists") see themselves to be, how they understand Scripture and how they think about doctrine. Overall, McClendon's contribution, while not without flaw, is original and commendable. As we summarize the preceding chapters, we will then be able to briefly state our assessment of McClendon's vision.

Following the introductory chapter, Chapter Two looked at the beginning of McClendon's narrative project, specifically his work on biography. We looked at this method's criteria and development, finding that it was the precursor to the baptist vision as it integrates life and Scripture. In McClendon's biographical work, we saw his attempts at reconstructing and unifying a baptist tradition around exemplary figures from baptist history (along with a few other radicals), but the selectivity of McClendon's biographies raised questions concerning the fragmentation and instability of baptist identity.

Chapter Three, perhaps the most foundational chapter, explicated the baptist vision as a typological practice in the baptist community. McClendon proposed a reading strategy with a set of rules to guide it, particularly utilizing distinctive baptist practices. All Christian traditions can read Scripture typologically, but we observed a particularly baptist way of doing so. McClendon

intended this to be a hermeneutical center to unify baptists, beyond the debates over historical criticism and biblical inerrancy.

Chapter Four begins with the concern for what a narrative approach could be without a metaphysic: a rendering of a literary God, lacking reality. However, this concern was answered by exploring the three-strand theory that McClendon uses throughout his work. This three-strand account offers a kind of metaphysical-narrative backbone to the vision, structuring his theology. While a narrative ontology could have had many more elements in it, his narrative approach is sufficiently realistic. Baptist, according to McClendon, are anastatically oriented, corresponding to the final strand. However, as we found, all Christians should have the anastic, it is more the question of how baptists utilize this strand in a particular way.

Chapter Five described McClendon's theology proper: his Christological method, how it functions, his narrative Christology, and finally his narrative doctrine of the Trinity. Here we found that the baptist vision is employed with thinking through how Christ and the Trinity is present to the church, and how the church lives out these realities. While his narrative approach is well nuanced, his two-narrative theology and doctrine of the Trinity were both very thin and unduly dismissed Christian tradition as a resource to guide their formulation. His narrative doctrine of the Trinity is his most objectionable section, as it unnecessarily rejected the language of person. As we concluded, McClendon was skillful in pointing out that the characters of the Trinity do not act as mere persons (especially the Holy Spirit), but that does not mean the language of person needs to be abandoned. This suggests that McClendon has not properly appreciated the resources of Christian tradition.

Chapter Six focused in on McClendon's use of signs. The language of sign is a biblical vocabulary for the actions of God in time, which the church remembers. Thus, McClendon

categorizes different types of signs and explains the ordinances of the church through them. Also, Christ, the “sign of signs,” configures time and other doctrines. Thus, this theory of signs offers a way of understanding some of the conundrums of creation and eschatology, and it also offers a kind of typological re-orientation point for thinking through and living out certain doctrines. Thus, like the three strand account in the previous chapter, the notion of signs offer means and mechanic by which the baptist vision bring the truth of Scripture into the present.

Chapter Seven described two tools, catachresis and picture-thinking, which are used to understand biblical texts as applicable today for the baptist vision. We found that a focus on catachresis in texts dealing with salvation, atonement, and creation offered a helpful level of precision. Similarly, McClendon’s picture-thinking offered a set of concepts that better makes sense of eschatological language and imagery. In all of these, we found images and events from the past and future speaking to the present in the manner the baptist vision calls for.

Chapter Eight looked at linguistic models for doctrine: doctrine as grammar and speech-acts. Grammar, the most substantive model in *Doctrine*, offers a way of thinking about doctrine both generally and specifically, which gets to a conviction’s underlying structure in order to describe it, so that it is accurate to how the church lives and confesses it. We found that grammar is oddly both caused by the baptist vision and the vision is a type of grammar of doctrine. Understanding doctrine as speech-acts, perhaps McClendon’s earliest insight into a postmodern way of theology, offers a way of thinking holistically about religious language and doctrine, preventing fideist and reductionistic expressions. This model also helps the church understand the relational and communicative function of Scripture by the Spirit in the church in the way that the baptist vision requires.

Chapter Nine addressed the concern that narrative theology undermines historicity. McClendon, as we saw, offers a nuanced description of what historicity looks like within the dimensions of a faith community. We find that McClendon upholds the general historical reliability of Scripture, but does not see absolute precision or perfection of the Bible's historical documentation as necessary to what Scripture does in the life of the church. Narrative reading, as we found, entails realistic reading, and this can mean several things based on the passage in question. The discernment of a faith community is required. In congruence with the baptist vision, Scripture is the book used by the Spirit to speak to the church, which in turn listens to Scripture with the virtues of typological practices. This allows the text to speak beyond its historic context and references to the present, potentially in new ways. While this does not solve all the questions of whether events in the Bible "happened," it does pull the debate away from an "all or nothing" problem.

Chapter Ten assessed the nature of "baptist" identity as a proposed platform for the future of all free-church communities. This proposed identity was vigorously debated during the time of the Baptist Manifesto, which contained many of the baptist vision's elements, proposing them for the enrichment of Southern Baptist life. The manifesto was rejected by many Baptists because of several misunderstandings, the largest one of which was the perception that it was forcing Anabaptist convictions into Baptist identity. However, as we found, while the Baptifesto's authors were influenced by Anabaptists, the convictions of the Baptifesto were Baptist in origin and biblical in intention. The "baptist" identity McClendon proposes assumes a minimal historical connection between Baptists and Anabaptists, but he intends it rather as a future prescription of all free churches to seek greater unity. Thus, if "baptist" includes other groups with little or no historical connection, the "baptist" identity, as something different from

Protestant or Catholic identities, becomes highly porous and vague. The end conclusion is that the “baptist” identity is meant to bring presently divided churches together into a more unified future. However, and despite McClendon’s best unifying intentions, this in many ways only reminds baptists of the challenge of fragmentation affecting their churches and of their distinctiveness from other Christians.

Chapter Eleven, the final chapter, following up on some of the challenges of the previous chapter and considered the baptist vision as a claim to catholicity, which is perhaps the vision’s most important test criterion. McClendon (and Yoder) saw a crisis in the baptist claim to historic legitimacy and proceeded to offer their own argument for the historic nature of catholicity and how baptists possess it. This catholicity is the reading of Scripture in community, implementing all contextual convictions in order to live in a Christ-like way today, particularly in regards to other Christians. This is a necessary and inspiring definition. As we found, however, their definition of catholicity dissolves the problem in theory but not in reality, as McClendon’s definition of catholicity is unconventional and the fragmented nature of baptist churches remains. This chapter moved on to tradition, examining McClendon’s recovery of a place for tradition in baptist theology. While amicable, as previous chapters have stated, McClendon could have perhaps gone further, recovering more of the great tradition to enrich baptist church life.

12.2 Positive Contributions of McClendon’s Work

Thus we see several overall positives about McClendon’s baptist vision: The first contribution McClendon has made is the baptist vision’s description of how the text is meaningful in the present. The various facets of the “this is that” dynamic show how the Bible is meaningful to the present, moving beyond the polarity of a naïve version of biblical inerrancy

and historical-critical approaches. To those that have experienced these bitter battles over the Bible, McClendon's work is constructive and refreshing.

The second contribution McClendon has made is applying various literary tools to doctrines, all of which render the doctrine discussed more productively. McClendon treated biography, typology, narratology (his three-strand account), signs, catachresis, picture-thinking, grammar, speech-acts, and midrash,² all to address issues of ethics, pedagogy, hermeneutics, ontology, time, catholicity, doctrinal revision, doctrinal plurality, the doctrine of creation, soteriology, sin, atonement, eschatology, Christology, Trinity, and our most sustained locus of reflection: baptist ecclesiology. Here McClendon earns high praise.

The third contribution is that McClendon sought to reform problematic convictions, particularly those pertaining to the baptist identity. McClendon throughout his career was attempting a kind of *ressourcement* of lost baptist voices. Coinciding with his second conversion, he sought to bring together Baptist and Anabaptist convictions, seeing the two as parts of the same identity. By proposing his "baptist" identity, he hoped to offer a platform for free-church ecumenism. His vision, along with that of Yoder, was intended to supply baptists with an account of catholicity after the fall of more naïve accounts (such as Landmarkism). His attempt to consistently think through a distinctly baptist voice is a sizeable accomplishment for baptists who are reminded of the fragmentation and division that their churches face.

Finally, fourth, McClendon contributes to more than just baptist theology. All theologians can profit from his creativity and originality. Very few theologians display the honesty and resolve to work through problematic convictions, attempting to propose better ones, in the way

² Midrash is not treated in this research project. It is a tool that McClendon briefly mentions in order to understand the function and plurality in doctrinal readings, specifically in regards to the atonement. Since Jewish midrash is fairly dissimilar to how McClendon uses it, and since he does so largely for heuristic purposes, midrash did not seem important enough to treat in this project.

McClendon did. The fact that his career was filled with turmoil due to his radicalism did not deter him or make him bitter. In this way, his is an example of perseverance for theologians.

12.3 Problematic Areas of McClendon's Work

Having said that, there are notable issues for concern in McClendon's account of narrative theology and baptist identity. The first and most persistent problem is the fragmentation of baptist churches. His partial assumption of a historic connection between Anabaptist and Baptists, coupled with his other descriptors, makes the baptist identity highly porous, struggling to articulate why it should be different from Protestant and Catholic types. After all, all Christians can use typology, and any Christian can use the narrative tools McClendon used. Yet, McClendon often instrumentally uses them for his baptist type. Given the division between Baptists and other free churches, McClendon's account is, as we noted, a prescription for a brighter future, not a unified identity found in the present or the past.

The second problem we encounter is with McClendon's use of tradition. We have observed his rather cavalier treatments of the history of doctrine, often resulting in a dichotomy between tradition and innovation. We saw this in particularly stark relief with McClendon's doctrines of the Trinity and two-narrative Christology, both of which were either compatible with or could have been enriched by classical counterparts. So, while McClendon does have a positive place for tradition, far more than most baptists, he could have given even more weight to the voices of the past—a surprising and ironic misstep, given the way in which he championed a theology enriched by past biographical examples.

The third problem in McClendon's work is that at many times his treatments, while original, are also thin. Since doctrine is primarily treated only in the second volume, this means McClendon forces himself to cover a lot of ground in a single book. At numerous points, he is

only able to offer a short sampling of what he is envisioning. Part of what this means is that McClendon's work is not meant to be a definitive theological statement, but rather a catalyst that others can use to write better theologies.

Finally, the fourth problem that we encounter is that narrative models and speech-act theory mitigate, but do not completely resolve, questions of historicity in the biblical narrative. Insisting that the biblical narrative ought to be read realistically as an integral whole is a productive insight, but it cannot dismiss concerns over whether a given event happened. Also, just because an event is important, does not mean it is infallible. Scripture in the church is to be read as the Spirit uses it to speak, which allows the text to potentially speak beyond its original historical setting and authorial intent, but this allowance cannot dismiss the work of analyzing Scripture to see if its claims are valid.

12.4 Conclusion

Clark Pinnock once said that his work as a theologian made him "more like a pilgrim than a settler."³ McClendon was a pilgrim whose theology does not provide a place to settle, but rather equips the pilgrim to journey well. McClendon's theology is definitely praiseworthy but not perfect. The baptist vision brings together the biblical narrative and baptist identity, attempting to apply literary tools to reflect on doctrine with greater precision, as well as offering an account of baptist convictions in order to work beyond the fragmentation that baptists have often experienced. Indeed, baptists face many challenges, and baptist theologians and pastors will have to continue McClendon's work to find further, and perhaps better, solutions. As we noted, not all narrative insights have been explored and not all problems in baptist life have been resolved, but nevertheless, his work offers a way forward.

³ Clark Pinnock, "A Pilgrim on the Way," *Christianity Today* 42.2 (Feb. 9, 1998), 43.

In McClendon's thought we see not just productive applications of narrative approaches, and not just theology from a baptist perspective. We are confronted with a mind of significant originality and character. He writes with honesty, as a mind resolved against settling on simple answers or into comfortable theological camps. His was a mind willing to question, explore, ask, and innovate, as well as a heart that never gave up on the church he loved. In doing so, his theology provides tools for the journey. His work does not show a baptist theology that has fully arrived to where it is going. It is like a walking stick and a compass: it gives support and direction.

While many will not see eye-to-eye with his specific doctrinal formulations, few can object to his character. McClendon noted, "theology means to struggle" (I, 17), and we can further say particularly, "to be a baptist is to struggle." In McClendon we see the fruit of a lifetime of struggling with Scripture in all the trials of baptist life. McClendon stayed faithful to his church in the midst of a life of turmoil and change. McClendon's journey was not an easy one, and if anyone seeks to follow his example of theological integrity as a baptist, that person will find out very quickly what he meant by "struggle." It is the struggle to constantly listen to the Spirit speaking in Scripture, while refusing liberalism and fundamentalism. It is the struggle of living out the character of Christ in the unique way baptists have been called to do, while refusing claims of superiority and exclusion. It is also the struggle to love a broken church, to love it enough to devote one's life to changing it, retrieving resources from the past and looking to the future. To do so takes nothing less than what McClendon taught and lived: vision.

Appendix 1: A Tribute to an Old Catfish

One of McClendon's insights into theology is that doctrine forms convictions that are embodied in the life of exemplary individuals. Their life stories, successful or unsuccessful, form data for theological reflection as Christians seek to live out important images of the faith in a better way (whether those images be of the atonement or the kingdom of God or whatever else). Their lives form test cases for the veracity of the convictions held. So, if doctrine is not lived out, it is not successful doctrine at all.

This places the current research project at an important juncture. If "theology must be at the least biography" (BT, 37), then we must inquire as to whether McClendon's life supports his own thesis. If not, the whole project might have a glaring contradiction. So we must ask: Are the convictions that McClendon wrote about the same as the ones he lived?

New England herring fishermen would keep their catch alive as they brought it to the market to ensure freshness. However, often they arrived at the market and the fish were dead. So, these fishermen eventually learned to put one catfish in with the herring. The prickly catfish's agitation proved effective at keeping the herring active enough to stay alive. A catfish among herring: this is how McClendon described himself.¹

This willingness to challenge the "herring" around him (including himself at times) is one of several convictions his life reflects that any interpreter of his work can use to better understand his theology. McClendon was often provocative, pushing the envelope. However, this radical posture, no matter how gentle he was, also cost him dearly. In this short biography, we shall retrace the life of James William McClendon, Jr. (or "Jim" as his friends called him) to see

¹ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World" (Note: under the title reads, "talk delivered to 'breakout' session at Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting in Richmond, VA, June/July 1996"), paragraph 6. Paragraphs are used for citations, as there is no pagination.

what convictions formed his theology. In doing so, we hopefully will pay tribute to an old catfish.

Born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1924 to a Methodist father and Baptist mother, McClendon's childhood is anything but irrelevant for the present project. The regular disciplines of Baptist Sunday school, church life (Sunday morning and evening), prayers before every meal, the duties of school and after-school ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps), etc.²—this culture impressed certain convictions upon him, some of which he kept to the day he died, while others he intentionally modified or rejected. Either way, they were formative. We see this in regards to several themes in his Baptist (and eventually “baptist”) identity, his relationship to racial issues, to academic freedom and integrity, and to the military and pacifism.

Shreveport's population was approximately one-third black, but young James McClendon knew no black person except for the household staff of his parents' home. He confessed that such an environment led him to believe the segregated state of affairs was “ordinary and proper” (III, 371).

One day his mother, Mary McClendon, invited their maid, Rebecca, to church to hear an inspiring speaker. Mary assured Rebecca that there was a place there for “colored” people. This entailed a designated section in the balcony. Yet Rebecca did not even make it that far: a few white boys took it upon themselves to tell her that she did not belong there. She left, came to work the next day distressed about it, and told Mary McClendon about the night, with James listening. In the final volume of his work, *Witness*, he writes,

I was neither disappointed nor angry—at least not as I remember it—but *I was profoundly ashamed*. Yet how could I have been ashamed of what I had neither caused nor consented to, this turning away of God's African-descended child from a Christian house of prayer, away from a church that claimed to be of her own Baptist faith? It was not the boys; it was

² McClendon, “The Radical Road One Baptist Took,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (October 2000): 503.

not even my mother's rather constrained hospitality (sending when she might have escorted Rebecca?). No, though I could not have named it, I was ashamed of the *system*, the whole wrong entrenched system of division in Christ's church. Somehow, uninstructed child though I was, I knew that what happened was wrong. As I sit now in my comfortable California home and write, that shame persists. (III, 373)

It was by no happenstance that when McClendon wrote the section on embodied ethics in his *Systematic Theology's* first volume, *Ethics*, he gave pride of place to black religion as the best example (I, 87). Such recollection was not mere illustration but a moral resolve never to forget, and never to allow others to forget what had happened to Rebecca.

Growing up Baptist meant other things, too. For him, it meant a rigid sense that at the end of the day there were two kinds of churches: good ones (Protestant-Baptist ones) and bad ones (Catholic ones, though they were really churches in name only).³ The rigidity became more specific when he was taught that Baptists were not actually "Protestants" either. His childhood Baptist identity was formed by a notion called "Landmarkism," which taught that Baptists had always been around, descending from the true vein of Christianity, persecuted constantly by the Catholic apostasy, leaving a "trail of blood" of witness. However, while Anabaptists, by the Landmarkist view, were tied to Baptists as their predecessors, they were rarely given any more consideration than that. Even through his master's degree, McClendon "paid no attention to the radical reformers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries."⁴

America entered into World War II when McClendon was a college freshman. "The question that the Pearl Harbor attack raised for American Christian youths like me was not whether to enlist in the armed forces of our country, but in which service to enlist."⁵ After going to Naval electronics schools at Harvard and MIT, he was commissioned as an ensign. However,

³ McClendon, "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World," par. 1.

⁴ McClendon, "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World," par. 3.

⁵ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 504.

the day he boarded *The Herald of the Morning*, an attack transport ship, in 1945, the peace treaty was signed in Tokyo Bay. In McClendon's words, his family would often joke, "when the Japanese intelligence learned I was now aboard a ship, they just gave up!"⁶

What later happened was no joke. His ship landed in Tokyo, and he recalled walking around in the midst of the carnage. Unapologetic firebombing had reduced blocks of residential apartments to slag in a "holocaust of unquenchable fire."⁷ McClendon recalls his attitude at the time: "I was young, I was callow, and I still had a youth's insensitive exterior. [...] So, I said to myself—this is war. I'm certainly glad our side won."⁸ These memories would slowly work in him a distaste for war and violence.

McClendon returned home and sensed that he was called to theological education. He completed a B.A. at the University of Texas (graduating in 1947), a B.D. at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, then a Th.M. at Princeton Theological Seminary (1952), where he studied under Otto Piper, and then finally, to Southwestern again to finish his doctorate (1953). At Southwestern, he hoped to study under Walter Conner, the Baptist intellectual successor to E. Y. Mullins, but Conner passed away before his arrival. This left McClendon to finish a doctorate on his own, with a dissertation entitled, "The Doctrine of Sin and the First Epistle of John: A Comparison of Calvinist, Wesleyan, and Biblical Thought."

While often a scholar is fixed to one tradition and its implicit canon of preferred thinkers, McClendon did the opposite. A characteristic diversity of influence was evident during these years:

My own theological grounding was solid Baptist evangelicalism, spiced with whiffs of the then current "biblical theology," and topped with a (quite antithetical) dollop of Boston personalism—Brown and Brightman. My theological heroes in those days were James

⁶ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 504.

⁷ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 505.

⁸ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 505.

Denney and P. T. Forsyth. John and Donald Baillie, Austin Farrer and Reinhold Niebuhr. That all this couldn't be held together didn't seem obvious to me.⁹

McClendon pastored for a brief stint in Louisiana before taking up a position at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. There he continued his education. He did post-doctoral work in philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley (1958–1960) and a visit to Oxford University (1962–1963). He attended lectures by Stanley Cavell and Thompson Clark on Wittgenstein. At Oxford, he studied under Ian Ramsey and met with philosophers such as Ryle, Hare, Grice, and Anscombe. Despite the institutions where McClendon was educated, Stanley Hauerwas remarked, “Jim was essentially self-educated, which meant that he exhibited a kind of independence that Baptists are alleged to value.”¹⁰

Returning to Golden Gate, there his convictions were first tested. While he quickly climbed the ranks during his stay there from 1954–1966, he soon found himself in trouble. He writes that when

the first chill winds of fundamentalist controversy began to blow strong in the Southern Baptist life, I with one or two other professors at Golden Gate fell under suspicion not for our latent baptist radicalism (indeed, that was not even visible), but for our mainline establishment Protestantism: perhaps I was (breathe it not!) actually neo-orthodox? My better students at Golden Gate found themselves under heavy pressure to conform to the prevailing ethos or depart.¹¹

McClendon, perhaps remembering the injustice done to Rebecca, sent students in support of Martin Luther King, Jr. Involving himself in the civil rights cause and student revolt, he soon found that his seminary, “although in California, was dominated by the mores of eastern Oklahoma.”¹² Supporting segregation and being against academic freedom, the seminary

⁹ McClendon, “A Brief Narrative Account of My Professional Life and Work to the Present (1969),” (Unpublished autobiographical paper, 1969): page 1.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 245.

¹¹ McClendon, “On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World,” par. 7.

¹² McClendon, “A Brief Narrative Account,” 2.

pressured McClendon into resigning after the student revolt in 1966: “freedom lost and I resigned.”¹³ While others compromised their integrity and conformed, as Hauerwas recalls, “Jim just wasn’t a fundamentalist.”¹⁴

Oddly enough, it was the Roman Catholics that took the jobless McClendon in. The Jesuit University of San Francisco hired McClendon in the heyday of Catholic ecumenism. He stayed there from 1966–1969. To his knowledge, he was the first non-Catholic in American history to be hired as a theology professor at a Catholic theology faculty. This offered him unique experience in articulating his Baptist beliefs: “It became my duty to represent the whole Protestant world.”¹⁵ At this time, he found himself moving away from neo-orthodoxy (despite Barth’s division of creation-revelation-redemption later forming the foci of McClendon’s *Ethics*). Barth’s voluminous *Church Dogmatics* did not prove the most student-friendly of ethics textbooks (I, 7)! Also, McClendon admits to becoming “more empirical, more experiential, more descriptive, and more radical”¹⁶ at this time.

Despite all the good intentions of the Catholic university to hire him and listen to his teaching, McClendon was no Catholic, nor was he about to toe party lines that did not belong to his own convictions. This inevitably caused friction: “The catfish was thus installed in the Catholic aquarium.”¹⁷ During the Vietnam War, McClendon deemed it “the wrong war at the wrong time in the wrong place.”¹⁸ So he set up war protests involving an open letter to Lyndon Johnson sent to the *San Francisco Examiner*. The university’s administration did not want the

¹³ McClendon, “A Brief Narrative Account,” 2.

¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, interview by author, Oct. 15, 2013, phone conversation with written notes.

¹⁵ McClendon, “On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World,” par. 8.

¹⁶ McClendon, “A Brief Narrative Account,” 2.

¹⁷ McClendon, “On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World,” par. 8.

¹⁸ McClendon, “The Radical Road One Baptist Took,” 505.

controversy associated with the institution. The letter was written on university letterhead, which was subsequently also used in calling for his resignation.¹⁹

McClendon found himself teaching at a few odd posts: Visiting Professor, Stanford University (1967), Visiting Associate Professor, Temple University (1969), Visiting Lecturer, University of Pennsylvania (1970), Jeffery Lecturer in Religion, Goucher College (1970–1971), Visiting Professor of Theology and Philosophy, University of Notre Dame (1976–1977).

At Notre Dame he had his office right next door to Hauerwas's, solidifying a friendship that had already been growing since the early 70s, when Hauerwas read an early paper of McClendon's on biography and theology.²⁰ Among Hauerwas's favorite memories were those of the two of them co-teaching a course on Catholic theology, using a Catechism of the Catholic Church. Hauerwas described McClendon as possessing "remarkable intellectual gregariousness."

McClendon eventually ended up at Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley (1971–1990). There the atmosphere was moderate and inviting. He enjoyed the depth of liturgy and history.²¹ He and his wife even attended an Episcopal parish and found its worship "astringent and bracing."²²

This led to the opportunity of converting to the Episcopal Church, which he declined. "The laying on of hands, long before, in a 1948 gathering of presbyters in Shreveport, Louisiana, was the ordination that counted for me."²³ So, he remained a Baptist at an Episcopalian divinity school. While the Episcopalians were more hospitable than his former Catholic colleagues, some did not like his decision to remain a Baptist. He writes,

¹⁹ McSwain and Allen's biography reports this as an urged resignation. Larry McSwain and Wm. Loyd Allen, eds., *Twentieth-Century Shapers of Baptist Social Ethics* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 101.

²⁰ Hauerwas, Oct. 15, 2013, phone conversation.

²¹ McClendon, "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World," par. 11–12.

²² McClendon, "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World," par. 11.

²³ McClendon, "On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World," par. 12.

Episcopalians liked to ask one another, “What is your background?” thus rejoicing in having transcended Christian diversity by their assumption into a new, inclusive unity. In fact, Episcopalians in Berkeley continued to ask me “What is your background?” for nearly two decades. They were never glad to hear that my foreground was like my background.²⁴

Despite quite a lot of opportunity to be welcomed into another tradition with open arms, McClendon remained a Baptist, but he always remembered that he was an exiled Baptist. This was a sad irony for a man that was deeply committed to not only his faith community but also the idea that faith is best expressed in community. He writes about this in 1978 with candor:

I am a denominationalist and a particularist; there is no theology-in-general, only the theology which consciously or otherwise springs from engagement with a particular community. Chance or providence has set me at work these dozen years outside my own people and for a quarter-century outside my native South. I am grateful for stimulating colleagues on two Coasts and in the Middle West, but it has been a costly time for my family life and for my own inner life.... I have never ceased to be in fact, a Southern Baptist Theologian. While earlier I was more the Calvinist, I have been deeply attracted in recent years to the other radical origin of Baptist life in the Anabaptist vision.²⁵

So, McClendon remained with his Baptist convictions, but with a small but significant modification: he went from “Baptist” to “baptist.” Attraction to the Anabaptist tradition began most tangibly in 1967 when McClendon met the young John Howard Yoder at a “Believer’s Church” conference in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1974, McClendon read Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*, and described it as a “second conversion.”²⁶ McClendon tells of how he read it night and day, several times. “It caused a revolution within me...it was the theological climax of my life...I was born anew.”²⁷ Penned into the inside cover of his copy it reads, “75/5/11 On or about

²⁴ McClendon, “On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World,” par. 11.

²⁵ McClendon, “A Decade of Dreams and Deeds: My History Continued, 1969–1978,” (Autobiographical manuscript, 1978), 2.

²⁶ McClendon, “The Radical Road One Baptist Took,” 508.

²⁷ McClendon, “On Being a Baptist in a Non-Baptist World,” par. 14.

this date, reading this book, I discovered again the disciple's way of my young manhood, and set out from this turning point to follow it anew."²⁸

Perhaps this is too zealous of an account. He had already been dismissed for protesting the Vietnam War. He also taught a course on war and peace at Goucher College. Perhaps reading Yoder only gave him the explicit affirmation of convictions long intuitively held: that Christ offered not just mechanisms for otherworldly salvation but an actual ethical pattern for political witness. Whatever the case, McClendon set out to do further research into the radical origin of the Baptists. Yoder's precise Christocentric approach to knowing God, living the Christian life, and acting out a Christian politic captivated McClendon's approach to theology. It is at this time, it might be said, that while McClendon was devoutly a "Baptist," he had definitively become a "baptist," small b. "I was—though I still have no love for the term itself—an 'Anabaptist' Baptist."²⁹ "Baptist" was no longer a very narrow identity that his fundamentalist upbringing had taught him. It no longer was the tapered stream that the Reformed-Baptist historiography claims. Baptist meant to be a part of a diverse and much older stream of radicals dating back to Petr Chelčický.

McClendon has said that after this point the story becomes a bit "easier to tell,"³⁰ which is a nice way of saying that his life after that becomes a bit less eventful. However, that is not quite the case. In the early 1980s, McClendon's marriage slowly collapsed. Through years of counseling and separation, both James and his wife, Marie, decided it was best to divorce.³¹

²⁸ Nancey Murphy, "Foreword," in CW1, xiii.

²⁹ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 508.

³⁰ McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 508.

³¹ Ched Myers, interview by author, Dec. 19, 2013, phone conversation with written notes: Myers was studying under McClendon during that time, and recounts that "[They] divorced in the eighties. I met her once before the divorce. [...] Jim had a sailboat. He had a great love of sailing on the San Francisco Bay. He was at ease out there. He had to sell the boat in the divorce, and to my knowledge he never sailed again." This statement, as Myers himself readily admits, may or may not be the case, but the impression is nevertheless accurate: the divorce left McClendon with a sense of brokenness.

A few years later, he met Nancey Murphy, who came to study at Graduate Theological Union. She recounts her first meeting with her then doctoral mentor: “‘They thought I was the only one on the faculty who could handle you,’ he said, referring to the fact that I’d just finished a Ph.D. in philosophy at Berkeley.”³² This would end up an ironic statement, as McClendon later married Murphy. While it was a bit controversial at the time for a teacher and a student to have a relationship, they got married in the summer of 1983. The two of them became deep companions, sharing a profound intellectual connection. It seems no coincidence that in 1985, when he first published *Ethics*, his chapter on body ethics (I: chap. 4) included the biography on Sarah and Jonathan Edwards, an “uncommon union,” whose love, with all the complexities and complications of life, enriched their faith in the God of the Bible.

As his personal life settled, so did his political involvement. Myers recalls him becoming much more gentle and mellow at this time:

When I met him, he was not as political. I was, and I wanted him to be involved with my advocacy work. But he said to me, “Some people want to be hoisting the sails, others need to be in the bottom of the boat reading the maps.” I have come to appreciate that now that I am older.³³

McClendon started his magnum opus at this time. In 1980 he felt a vocation to write a systematic theology that reflected the radical baptist stream that provided so much spiritual nourishment to him. This three-volume project would take almost twenty years to write. A committed stylist in his writing, friends who previewed his work noted how he would agonize over every word.³⁴

The 1990s were more eventful for McClendon than he admits. As part of his egalitarian commitment, he accompanied his wife to where she taught.³⁵ In 1990 McClendon became

³² Murphy, “Foreword,” in CW1, xi.

³³ Myers, Dec. 19, 2013, phone conversation.

³⁴ Kyle Childress, interview by author, Oct. 15, 2013, phone conversation with written notes.

³⁵ Murphy, “Foreword,” in CW1, xii.

Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Fuller Theological Seminary, where his wife was also teaching.

During this time, in 1992, McClendon's commitment to the Christian way and the Christian community was tested again. Yoder, McClendon's mentor and theological collaborator, had his ordination suspended due to accusations of sexual misconduct.³⁶ Many turned to denounce Yoder. However, McClendon, a person who felt a deep sense of brokenness from his own past, chose to act with understanding. A Mennonite disciplinary committee formed with the hope to eventually restore Yoder through a process of making amends. Rather than turning to denounce him, Hauerwas, Glen Stassen, and McClendon formed a support group, encouraging him through the difficult measures the disciplinary committee required of him. Largely because of the gracious efforts of that support committee, Yoder was restored to fellowship with his wife and his Mennonite church after four years. He died later in 1997. Hauerwas writes, "Jim led the way. [...] Jim pointed out that John had convinced us to be advocates of Christian nonviolence. We now expected him to live out what he had taught us. John agreed to submit."³⁷

As McClendon penned the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, he took up an interim pastoral position at Pasadena Church of the Brethren.³⁸ Having been away from the pastorate since his youth, he finally got a regular opportunity to preach and teach regularly from the pulpit. The church, troubled from a bitter falling out between itself and its former pastor, asked McClendon if he could step in to teach for a year while they found a replacement.

³⁶ This scandal was recorded in detail by a series of articles written by Tom Price in the Indiana newspaper, *The Elkhart Truth* (Yoder's hometown), between June 29 and July 16, 1992. These articles are accessible in Ted Grimsrud, "John Howard Yoder's Sexual Misconduct (1992 *Elkhart Truth* articles)," *Peace Theology*, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://peacetheology.net/john-h-yoder/john-howard-yoder%E2%80%99s-sexual-misconduct%E2%80%94introductory-article/>.

³⁷ Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child*, 245.

³⁸ The name of the church is not mentioned in MGS. Ched Myers provided the name. Myers, Dec. 19, 2013, phone conversation.

McClendon was “very pastoral. Always willing to listen to people. He was not too quick to offer advice. He experienced a lot of brokenness and failure, but it made him humble. He was not ‘stuck in his head.’ He was very emotionally open.”³⁹

In that same year, the church turned back toward good health. McClendon saw this as not only helping a church to become healthier, but also helping a church to embody atonement.⁴⁰ This was done by careful pastoral work, particularly teaching on discipleship. The resulting sermons with commentary were published in the book, *Making Gospel Sense to a Troubled Church*. These sermons display many notable examples of his baptist vision, which will be discussed later. What is notable here is his honesty he had about his turbulent past, interpreted through the lens of the gospel:

In all those places there were discouragements. I was dismissed by one university and unsought by others. I was misunderstood often, slandered at one university by a fellow professor, shunned by many. The marriage of my youth failed. My children apparently found the Christian journey too difficult for them and dropped out. Where was my long trail leading? Yet all the time, through all the backtracking, the disappointments, the fresh starts, God seems to have had a plan for my life, and the evidence for that is that God used all that I had been in order to remake my life when again and again I had to start over. (MGS, 19)

Kyle Childress commented on this:

Jim’s witness was not perfect. He was better at some parts of the gospel than others. And the same is true for each and every one of us. But by the grace and mercy of God we as witnesses, broken, fragmented, and partial, point to Jesus Christ.⁴¹

The next year (1994) he released the second volume of his trilogy. Mark Thiessen Nation remarked that as McClendon wrote the draft for *Doctrine*, he would share it with his students

³⁹ Myers, Dec. 19, 2013, phone conversation.

⁴⁰ Terrence Tilley, e-mail to author, Oct. 5, 2013.

⁴¹ Kyle Childress, “The Witness of Jim McClendon,” (Unpublished sermon delivered for the memorial service for James Wm. McClendon, Jr., at Shiloh Baptist Church, Mooringsport, Louisiana, November 11, 2000), 8.

during evenings at his house.⁴² To do theology, for McClendon, was to do theology in community, and to do so always.

The closing years of the '90s saw more turbulence. History repeated itself as the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) continued. Liberal and moderate Baptists were replaced or dismissed, sometimes quietly and gently, other times forcibly and even underhandedly. In 1987 a small group of moderates and liberals, called the Alliance of Baptists, left the SBC. In 1990, a much larger moderate group, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, constituted themselves as a kind of convention within the larger convention.

In 1997, the document “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity” was penned and signed. McClendon was one of six authors. The document was meant to function as a manifesto for moderate Baptists. This manifesto had five articles, calling for the following: communal over private or objectivizing interpretation; shared discipleship over individualism (an unfortunate by-product of soul competency); shared common life over sectarian or authoritarian communities; affirmation of baptism, preaching, and the Lord’s Table as powerful “signs” rather than ritualism or mere symbolism; and the affirmation of freedom in religious life over employments of strategies of coercion. McClendon was the primary intellectual architect of this attempted movement, and thus his writings were meant to provide the theological backbone for it. This, unfortunately, did not happen as the manifesto was heavily criticized.

In 2000, McClendon was hospitalized from congestive heart failure, which had been getting worse over the past two years. The final volume, *Witness*, was submitted shortly before his hospitalization. Michael Goldberg, a former student of McClendon, thought to tell Robert Ratcliffe, the editor at Abingdon Press, who rushed a copy from press to him so that he could see

⁴² Mark Thiessen Nation, e-mail to author, Oct. 7, 2013.

his work completed before he died. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., passed away on October 30.⁴³ Childress preformed the memorial at Shiloh Baptist Church in Mooringsport, Louisiana (a town just outside of Shreveport, McClendon's hometown). The funeral event requires backstory.⁴⁴

McClendon was buried on land that he had bought years earlier. The land was clear-cut by Texaco to a worthless waste.⁴⁵ McClendon bought it for very little and considered it his own act of service to advancing rights in his later years, only this time the rights were environmental, not civil. He often came and stayed on the land, taking time to plant trees. The land was near a small, local (predominately black) Baptist church there, called Shiloh Baptist. He came to know the pastor there, Leon Robertson, and the church even purchased some of the land from him to expand theirs.⁴⁶ McClendon often invited friends to the land. Some of these were baptist friends like Childress, and they would walk and talk about life and faith. Those walks remain some of the best memories Childress has of his friend. "He had an iconic, tree-planter look," Childress recalled, "tall, white beard, long strides." Other times, he would go hunting with local friends, "good ol' Southern boys," as Childress called them. On Sundays, he would visit Shiloh Baptist Church, where he felt profoundly at home.

McClendon's ashes were buried on this plot of land, in a small, iron-fenced cemetery erected by the previous owners of the land. It had been raining for two weeks, and the family had to get the ashes to the gravesite in the hunting buddies' 4x4's. His epitaph read, "tree farmer and baptist theologian."⁴⁷

Before and during this more intimate service was the main funeral service. Childress recalls this funeral as perhaps the most memorable funeral he has ever preformed: the oddity of a

⁴³ Murphy, "Foreword," in CW1, xii–xiii.

⁴⁴ Childress, October 15, 2013, phone conversation.

⁴⁵ Ralph Wood, "Feasting on the Manna: An Account of the Funeral Service for James Wm. McClendon, Jr." (Unpublished written account, Nov. 11, 2000), 1.

⁴⁶ Wood, "Feasting on the Manna," 1.

⁴⁷ Wood, "Feasting on the Manna," 3.

white pastor preaching to the predominantly black congregation of Shiloh Baptist, with upper-class white folk from First Baptist of Shreveport (McClendon's family), professors from across the nation, a jazz ensemble (per McClendon's request), and McClendon's rather unchurched hunting buddies at the back in their overalls and boots. "We had a feast in the fellowship hall. It was a sight to behold!" Childress remarked. It seems that the life McClendon lived reflected the characteristic diversity of the kingdom he was convicted about.

The work of this tribute is to remember James McClendon not only through the very helpful autobiographical pieces he wrote, but also through the memories of the religious community that he loved and that loved him in return. From these, we see several important convictions: baptist identity, intellectual integrity, pacifism, racial equality, and ecumenism.

McClendon's life displays an important commitment to the Baptist tradition that he was raised in, with all its highs and lows. Indeed, despite quite a lot of "lows" from fundamentalist Baptists that offered more than enough warrant to leave, as well as the constant invitation from his Episcopalian colleagues to walk down the Canterbury trail—coming "home to Rome" proved too authoritarian a possibility for McClendon at University of San Francisco—McClendon remained a committed Baptist.

Now, this was not a blind adherence, as he slowly went from Baptist to an Anabaptist "baptist." This meant the rejection of fundamentalism but also a rejection of liberalism: "that Fundamentalists have not been fundamental enough and the Liberals have not been liberal enough to hear all the Bible's words as words for them" (I, 31). A part of this was his ardent, life-long protest against racism. Such commitment, as we have seen, cost him his job.

Intertwined with this adoption of a more "Anabaptist" version (he often expressed his dislike of the term) of Baptist identity is his gradually growing distaste for war and an attendant

conviction of pacifism. Seeds were sown in the memories he had of World War II's aftermath, coming to definitive expression in his protests against the Vietnam War, and explicitly affirmed in his "second conversion" in reading Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*.

A part of this journey as a "baptist" meant an important working-through of what the tradition meant in regards to ecumenism and catholicity. It seems that McClendon's diverse teaching career quite forcibly educated him in the ways of other traditions, but he was better for it. Suffice it to say McClendon practiced what he preached, and this is a reassuring report for this research project.

There is an old joke that says that a Methodist is a Baptist that has learned to read. In other words, the Baptist tradition has a reputation for ignorance. James McClendon did not fit that stereotype. "That this is true and that McClendon was until the day he died, quite happily, an ordained Southern Baptist minister not only says something about McClendon as an individual but serves, one can hope, generally to challenge the unfair stereotyping of Southern Baptists."⁴⁸ Sadly, many of his fellow Baptists still do fit that stereotype, but McClendon exemplifies the potential for the tradition to be more than just divisive fundamentalism. As Childress pointed out, while McClendon spent his career writing biographies on exemplary Christian individuals, his life is no less the case.⁴⁹

McClendon preferred biography to autobiography because the stories of exemplary individuals become a part of the tradition and community that cherishes them. We have attempted to tell his story through the community of his wife, students, colleagues, and friends. They (and we, as a community of faithful readers) are the ultimate judges for how a life is

⁴⁸ Nation, "James Wm. McClendon, Jr.: A Particular Baptist Theologian," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 1. 2 (January 2001): 52. In this tribute, Nation lists that McClendon will be remembered as being an ecumenist, baptist, and in particular, a Southern Baptist.

⁴⁹ Childress, "The Witness of Jim McClendon," 4.

remembered and passed on. Thus, one correction is important to mention. This section was begun as a tribute to an old catfish. The “catfish” was an image McClendon chose later in life to jokingly explain his turbulent career as a baptist. In that regard, when reflecting on his life, his friends do not invoke the image of the prickling catfish. They remember McClendon’s life as embodying the image of Christ. Childress writes,

He did all of this [referring to the reason why he lost two positions in his career] not because he was a rebel [a catfish!] and not because he wanted to cause trouble or because he wanted to be different. He did these things because he was a witness of Jesus. That same Jesus who calls us to peace, not violence and war, to reconciliation, not segregation and bigotry.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Childress, “The Witness of Jim McClendon,” 8.

Appendix 2: The Anabaptist Connection

As we noted in Chapter Ten, the rejection of McClendon's proposal by many Southern Baptists was in part an allergic reaction to its "Anabaptist" character. So, exploring this connection between Baptists and Anabaptists for ourselves (beyond McClendon's minimal arguments) is a worthwhile aside to this research project. Since, as we stated, the "baptist" identity does not require a historical connection, this section is not essential to our research project, but is nevertheless relevant. The baptist vision situates itself, to some degree, according to an assumed historical connection between Baptists and Anabaptists, which we have found is far from straightforward.

The Anabaptist-Baptist connection (which can be defined in several ways) needs further exploration and evaluation. The connection, as we will see, is evident on several fronts (and problematic on others), and even that still does not completely answer the question of relevance. So, we will discuss the possible ways of connectedness, the different historical instances of each kind of connection, and finally their relevance.

The Nature of Connection

As Goki Saito notes, there are several reasons why Baptists have argued for (and against) such a connection.¹ In the seventeenth century, the connection was largely ignored because of doctrinal disagreements. However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Baptist historians presupposed the connection in order to validate their successionist views of the Baptist church, tracing back to John the Baptist. As more critical scholarship arose in the twentieth century, two sides debated the evidence for and against the connection. Contemporary Reformed Baptists

¹ Goki Saito, "An Investigation into the Relationship between the Early English General Baptists and the Dutch Anabaptists," (Th.D. Diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1974). Saito offers a comprehensive survey of the all the historians, their arguments, and debates in the first chapter of his dissertation.

sought to root their identity in the Reformation and then in the English Particular Baptist movement. Anabaptists often included Baptists as a sub-tradition within their identity.²

What does such a connection look like? There are various types of influence, and we might group them as follows, with each raising accompanying concerns.³ (1) There is general cultural influence, which cannot demonstrate distinctions of identity definitively but is apparent in how the Anabaptist refugees came from continental Europe to England, forming the intellectual cradle for Puritanism and eventually the Baptists. (2) There is a kind of modal similarity, where just as Anabaptists were dubbed this name in Europe as a third mode of Christianity apart from Catholicism and state Protestantism, so also Baptists were seen as “Anabaptists” in England and America, distinct from the dominant modes in place there. While specific theological convictions are different, the general “mode” of these groups reveals their similarity. (3) There is also a direct theological similarity. European Anabaptists and English and American Baptists did share several convictions. Did they happen upon these similarities by the merit of both of them possessing the same Bible, or is there evidence of direct theological influence in the literature? If there are direct evidences of theological influence, is this intentional, and does it outweigh the differences? After all, both groups still relied heavily, self-consciously or not, on Catholic creedal tradition, yet disavowed any ecclesial connection, and moreover, often denounced each other. Can two communities that do not affirm each other still be apart of the same identity? We will investigate these questions. So, (4) the last and most tangible connection might be displays of direct and intentional theological influence, as well as fellowship between Anabaptists and Baptists. However, while there were moments of fellowship,

² See for instance, Durnbaugh, *Believer's Church*, 97.

³ Martyn J. Whittock discusses models for understanding Baptist roots in “Baptist Roots: The Use of Models in Tracing Baptists,” *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 57 (Oct. 1985), 319. He suggests an “organic” model and a dynamic model, which would correspond to types (c) and (a) respectively.

as we will see, there was no ultimate, lasting association. With these four types of connections stated, we can see examples of all of them surrounding the origins of English Baptists, and so we will now offer a brief description of the Anabaptist-Baptist connection and its implications for the baptist vision.

Evidence of Historical Connection

Here is a brief set of evidences for a historical connection, offered according to the types of connection outlined above:

1. *General influence is demonstrable through the apparent movement of Anabaptists into England, but there is the question as to whether or not this is necessary.* As the European Anabaptists fled from Holland to England, communities formed in England where Puritanism and Separatism eventually sprang up, making Anabaptism in England the cultural-intellectual cradle for the Puritans and Separatists.

By 1535, there were many Dutch Anabaptists living in England, and thereafter their numbers increased steadily. The proportion who were Anabaptists is unknown, but in 1562 Dutch people in England numbered 30,000. Gregory records that between 50,000 and 100,000 Dutch refugees came to England in the period of the struggle of the Netherlands against Alva. They came in largest numbers when persecution was greatest in their country and when England offered promising refuge, and they congregated in the East Coast centers such as London, Norwich (where they were a majority of the population in 1587), Dover, Romeney, Sandwich, Canterbury, Colchester, and Hastings.... The earliest experiment in congregational separatism took place under the leadership of Robert Browne in Norwich. In other centers in which Anabaptists had settled in large numbers some of the earliest Baptist communities took shape.⁴

As William Lumpkin and Bill Leonard conclude, “The Anabaptists were Puritans before Puritanism had sprung into recognized existence, and held substantially all that Puritans

⁴ William Lumpkin and Bill Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 2011), 12–13.

afterwards contended for.”⁵ Simon Dyton writes,

The Anabaptists were not only the radical vanguard of the Puritan Revolution in England, but the radical extreme of the European Reformation. Like puritans, they despised ecclesiastical excesses and tithes, and insisted on the abolition of the Mass and the right to choose their own preachers. They were united by their common insistence upon the invalidity of infant baptism and, on the continent, extended Martin Luther’s revival of faith to a revival of piety, holiness, and “moral improvement”: in this respect, they anticipated the puritan movement in England, where their commitment to reform gave radical impetus to the movement in the 1640s, and in America, where puritan colonists tolerated their baptismal differences because they also supported congregational church government.⁶

While the Puritans became theologically quite different from the Anabaptists, adopting a strict Calvinism, they retained two defining characteristics: the separation of church and state as well as the rejection of infant baptism, the exact mode of which was not uniform. Thus, we see a general connection of social movement between the Anabaptists, Puritans, and later Baptists in England and America.

However, we must ask, to what degree does a sociological connection matter? If two groups do look at the same Bible and conclude similar convictions even though they are not sociologically related, according to the believer’s church ecclesiology, should they not be considered a part of the same identity? If two groups share a believer’s church ecclesiology—that who they are as a church is determined not by ecclesial affiliation or apostolic succession but by the gathering of like-minded disciples—should it matter whether Baptists and Anabaptists are tangibly connected in their origins? It would seem by this theological rationale not to be necessary, but then the question remains: just how similar the Baptists and Anabaptists are in convictions, and how different are these from those of other Christians?

⁵ Lumpkin and Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 13–14.

⁶ Simon Dyton, “Anabaptism,” in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America*, Francis Bremer and Tom Webster, eds. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 298.

2. *Going further than this general influence, the Anabaptists on the continent and the later English and American Baptists share what might be called a “modal” similarity.* They were “third modes” of Christianity. The Anabaptists were not the magisterial Reformers just as the Baptists were not Anglicans, either in England or America. While these groups had disagreements, as Durnbaugh points out, they share an ecclesiology and style of church that identifies them as similar.⁷ Both formed this third mode, holding to a free-church ecclesiology (which they share with others that McClendon includes), a dissenting expression that was persecuted by the Protestant and Catholic state churches alike. Anabaptists and Baptists share a similar ethos and ecclesiology.

However, we must ask this: what does this modal similarity mean today when some Baptists are dissenters within their own Baptist conventions? This mode was situated as describing those that historically did not fit into Protestant state churches or Catholic ones. However, it also seems to designate a third mode between liberals and conservatives in these denominations. So, the notion of mode, while not without its uses, can also be vague.

3. *Theologically, we also see that these movements did hold to central common convictions, notably a common name.* The central common convictions would be believer’s baptism and the separation of church and state.

In regards to baptism (the conviction more important to Baptists),⁸ it seems that for the early Anabaptists, the condition of regeneration rather than method was the most important concern for the doctrine of baptism (135). But the mode of baptism itself has been seen as a cause for division. While both Anabaptists and the English Baptists share their commitment to

⁷ Durnbaugh, *Believer’s Church*, 3–33.

⁸ For an analysis of believer’s baptism in early Anabaptist thought (Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Hut, Melchior Hoffman [alt.: Hofmann], Pilgram Marpeck), see Rollin Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1966). See William Lumpkin, *The History of Immersion* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 23–26. Bernhard Rothmann and Pilgram Marpeck also both taught immersion; see Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Kitchener: Herald, 1981), 8.15 & 8.20.

believer's baptism, they differed on mode, the Anabaptists by aspersion (much more focused on baptismal regeneration than method), the English Baptists by immersion. However, some Anabaptists did baptize by immersion. While their baptismal practice was not uniform, there are several instances of baptism by immersion being taught and practiced. Conrad Grebel was reported to have baptized a man named Wolfgang Uoliman, who zealously requested full immersion in the Rhine, thereafter continuing the practice. While Hubmaier did not teach immersion, his church in Augsburg practiced it. Eventually some Anabaptist movements such as the Polish Racovians, the Italian Anabaptists (although they became non-Trinitarian), the Hutterites, and the Schwarzenau Brethren (or "New Baptists," led by Alexander Mack in Germany) did adopt immersion as the normative mode of baptism.

Anabaptists, particularly the Swiss contingent, often referred to themselves as "täufer" (Baptist) not merely "wiedertäufer" (Anabaptist). Just as Particular Baptists dismissed the title used of them in England,⁹ "Anabaptist" was often used as a slur against the radical reformers. The Anabaptists did come to use the term ("wiedertäufer"), but they preferred other words. They saw believer's baptism as the only true baptism (i.e., not a re-baptism) and this was mostly connected to their conviction of freeing themselves from the state church. Thus, Anabaptists often referred to each other simply as "brethren." In the Netherlands, it was more common for Anabaptists to refer to themselves as the "covenanters" or, in Dutch, "doopsgezinde" (baptism-minded). However, in Switzerland, the movement used the term "täufer" (baptist) as normative.¹⁰

⁹ For instance, the title of the *First London Confession* reads "The Confession of Faith by those churches commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptist"; see Lumpkin and Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 141. As Lumpkin points out, the signatories of this confession were described as Anabaptists by their opponents, who saw them as the English equivalents of the European groups. Most prominent of these opponents were Daniel Featly, who wrote *The Dippers dipt. or, The Anabaptists duck't and plunged Over Head and Eares, at a Disputation in Southwark* (1645).

¹⁰ For references to the Swiss Anabaptist calling themselves "baptists" (*Täufer*, which is translated "Anabaptist" in the text), see David J. Rempel Smucker and John L. Ruth, eds., *Documents of Brotherly Love, Dutch Mennonite Aid to Swiss Anabaptists*, vol. 1 (1635–1709), trans. James Lowry (Millersburg: Ohio Amish Library, 2007). Thus, the Swiss Anabaptists overtly identified themselves as baptists.

Thus, for instance, when Zwingli confronted the radical reformer party in Zurich, he referred to them as “Catabaptists” while the party presented themselves in the debates as the “Baptist party.”¹¹ While there are multiple names these groups went by, the Anabaptists did identify themselves as baptists. And while these convictions were less refined, if one was to write a history of the “Baptists,” it would make sense to begin then not with John Smyth, but with the Anabaptists.

Beyond baptism and the separation of church and state, there are other convictions that they held in common. These similarities are comprehensively mapped out in the Baptist World Alliance document *Baptists and Mennonites in Dialogue*, based on talks that occurred from 1989–1992, which explains these historic convergences, as well as the divergences.¹²

The question of course then is whether the similarities outweigh the differences. Baptists and Anabaptists do share a set of core convictions, but have typically refused fellowship with each other over issues such as the definitive mode of baptism (immersion or aspersion), taking of oaths, the use of the ban, or military service. Theological similarity and the question of identity gets more complicated as Anabaptists and Baptists are both highly dependent on Reformed theology and Catholicism for many of their beliefs, yet McClendon sees his theology operating in a “third” mode distinct from these. Moreover, if Baptists share convictions with other Protestants not in McClendon’s list, or with Catholics, how are baptists to understand their identity vis-à-vis that similarity? This implication we will take up later.

4. *Finally, while the connection between the Anabaptists and the English Baptists is not straightforward, there are notable points of contact, both direct transference of theological*

¹¹ Huldreich Zwingli, “The Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists, 1527” in *The Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1901), 123.

¹² Baptist World Alliance, *Baptists and Mennonites in Dialogue* (Falls Church: Baptist World Alliance, 2013).

convictions and, more importantly, the seeking of fellowship. We see this firstly in direct but unintentional adoption of theological distinctives.

General Baptists were directly influenced by Mennonite ecclesiology on several issues. While the theologies of John Smyth and his followers were dynamic to say the least, they did appear to self-consciously adopt Anabaptist convictions, as part of their own Baptist identity, from the Mennonites. Smyth's original decision to reject infant baptism seems to have originated from his own Separatist thinking in England.¹³ He later arrived a full theology of immersion baptism in the year after arriving in Holland (1608–1609), but again, there is no indication as to whether he saw and was inspired by the Waterlander Anabaptists and their immersion practices. He may have seen the Waterlanders, but that is speculation. After this he sought membership in the Waterlander community, and he and Thomas Helwys parted company. It is here that a more concrete link is found. After Smyth joined the Mennonites, he wrote his *Confession of Faith* (1609) that borrowed heavily from the *Second Waterland Confession* (1580). This confession was read by Helwys and several parts of it were borrowed for his *Synopsis of Faith* (1610) and *Declaration* (1611). Eight articles appeared to have been borrowed verbatim from Smyth for the *Synopsis*, and six for the *Declaration*. As Saito compares the doctrinal summaries in Helwys' works to the *Second Waterland Confession*, the articles on good works, the sacraments, church discipline, and eschatology appear to be indirect influences that cannot be explained by Helwys' existing Separatist convictions.¹⁴ Helwys' successor, John Merton, shows no signs of being personally influenced by the Waterlanders, but he nevertheless adopts the same convictions from

¹³ Saito, "An Investigation," 176. This point is noted in Gordon Belyea, "The Origins of the Particular Baptists," *Themelios* 32.3 (2007): 40–67. However, Belyea cites a 1962 article by Stassen, failing to interact with his (1998) more expanded articles that demonstrate the connection between Menno's theology and the *First London Confession*. Belyea also argues, citing James M. Renihan's article (see below), that the Particular Baptists were resolutely reformed in mentality (see Belyea's article and the sources cited there). As Stassen shows, this does not discount the possibility of theological syncretism, borrowing from Mennonite theology, which he demonstrates in his 1998 articles (cited and further discussed below).

¹⁴ Saito, "An Investigation," 179.

Helwys that Helwys, in turn, had adopted from Smyth and the Waterlanders. Later, the two communities did have active correspondence from 1624–1630, where active fellowship was sought but did not materialize due to differing convictions on the ban and serving in government.¹⁵ Thus, as for the General Baptists, they borrowed several theological convictions through John Smyth, and did seek fellowship, although it did not materialize.

While the Particular Baptists were opposed to the Anabaptists, there are considerable intentional and unintentional connections. As Glen Stassen points out in his 1998 articles in *Baptist History and Heritage*, the Particular Baptists, who were most sharply opposed to the title “Anabaptists,” did receive their convictions on baptism (and church polity) from the Anabaptists.¹⁶ While this community rejected infant baptism on their own, a prominent member, Richard Blunt, was sent by the English congregations to Holland to inquire and enter fellowship with the Collegiant Mennonites, who were already practicing baptism by immersion. It appears that these parties did recognize each other despite the geographic split, and it is only after Blunt returned that the Particular Baptists constituted themselves, undergoing baptism by immersion, which was led by Richard Blunt. This raises an interesting question: If Richard Blunt led the baptizing of the English congregation after having “fellowship” with the Dutch congregation, does this imply that Richard Blunt was baptized by the Collegiants? James Leo Garrett, jr. notes that while it is not stated explicitly, it is probable.¹⁷

¹⁵ Saito, “An Investigation,” 152–68.

¹⁶ Glen H. Stassen, “Revisioning Baptist Identity by Naming Our Origin and Character Rightly,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1998): 45–54. This article effectively takes into account the world of Stanley A. Nelson, who has argued that some of the supposedly direct influence came actually by William Ames in his *Marrow of Theology*. See his “Reflecting on Baptist Origins: The London Confession of Faith of 1644,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 29 (1994): 34–35. While Nelson rightly demonstrates that Ames was an important influence on the confession, he insufficiently demonstrates Ames’s influence over the articles of baptism. This is where Stassen, rebutting Nelson in 1998, shows that the language of the confession “followed Menno in the same words, the same meanings, the same Scripture passages, and in basically the same order” (41).

¹⁷ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 53.

Also, as Stassen demonstrates, while some of the theology that sounds Anabaptist is traceable to mediating sources like William Ames (on which Stanley Nelson argued against Stassen in 1994),¹⁸ it still seems that the baptismal theology of the *First London Confession* is a summary from Menno's *Foundation-Book*. It appears likely that while the Particular Baptists were firmly Reformed in their soteriology, several of their convictions were directly and intentionally imported from these Mennonites.¹⁹

While Anabaptists and Baptists remained separate and antagonistic to each other in England and America, we should also note that in Europe, Anabaptists and Baptists converge in several ways. In the 18th century, Alexander Mack founded the New Baptists (*Neue Täufer*). While they have no formal connection to the English and American Baptists, they practiced immersion baptism among other similarities.²⁰ As we have already noted, American and English Baptists (as well as the General and Particular Baptists in England) are not connected in their origin, yet grew to recognize each other. Meanwhile, history books on Baptists often neglect the German Baptists founded by Mack.

Also, when the Baptist leader Gerhard Oncken began to spread Baptist churches in 1834, this group became heavily intertwined with the Mennonite Brethren movement in South Russia.²¹ Their relationship became one of mutual recognition and partnership. Such a convergence exemplifies McClendon's intentions of the baptist vision.

¹⁸ Stassen, "Revisioning Baptist Identity," 45–54. Stanley A. Nelson, "Reflecting on Baptist Origins," 34–35.

¹⁹ Stassen, "Opening Menno Simon's *Foundation-Book* and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins Alongside the Mother-Calvinist Congregationalism," *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1998): 34–44. For a defense of the resolutely Reformed character of the London Baptists, see James M. Renihan, "'Truly Reformed in a Great Measure': A Brief Defense of the English Separatist Origins of Modern Baptists," *The Journal of Baptist Studies* 3 (2009): 24–32. However, as Renihan merely reiterates the disdain the Particular Baptists had for the Anabaptists, it does not disprove syncretistic influence.

²⁰ See Alexander Mack, *The Complete Writings of Alexander Mack*, ed. William Eberly (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1991).

²¹ See Johann E. Pritzkau, *German Baptist in South Russia*, trans. Walter Regehr (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2013).

So, in both these instances, the General and Particular Baptists have close connections such as direct theological transference, whether intentional or not, and moments of recognition and fellowship. However, both the General and the Particular Baptists did not ultimately associate themselves with Anabaptist groups, over problematic differences.

Relevance

From this we can conclude the following about an Anabaptist-Baptist connection, which has both positive and negative aspects for McClendon's proposal:

1. *Baptists and Anabaptists can be considered parts of the same historical identity, but this does not definitively answer questions of present-day theological identity or affiliation.* We see connections in general cultural influence, modal similarities, a similar name, some general theological similarities, tangible points of theological transference and contact, including efforts to seek fellowship. These would imply that Anabaptists and Baptists are in some ways connected.

As a historiographical corrective, while the Anabaptists were in many ways different from the Particular Baptists and General Baptists, a history of the Baptist movement should start at least where the name and central distinctives began. To be most accurate, the "Baptist" movement is at least a three-strand cord of continental Anabaptists (all the sub-movements that recognized each other thereafter), General Baptists (closely intertwined with the other movements that surrounded John Smyth, who himself later became a Mennonite), and Particular (Reformed) Baptists, with their counterparts in America.

A part of this assertion is that Baptist history should be written from a free-church historiography, which would mean taking the notion of the gathered church into account in looking for similarities. If the history of an identity is constituted by theological characteristics

(as opposed to sociological characteristics) then such a history must include all those that held it. If the believer's church is constituted where "two or three are gathered" (Matt. 18:20) without necessarily a sociological or historical connection, and if baptists are identified by, for instance, believer's baptism and the separation of church and state, then a case can be made that Anabaptists and Baptists are of the same broad identity.

2. *Thus, while McClendon assumes some kind of historical connection at least between Baptists and Anabaptists, his ecclesiology does not require one, in fact does not invoke one in including other identities.* For this reason, this appendix is non-essential to our project. As we have noted, McClendon sees the "baptist" identity as broadly inclusive of Pentecostals, Methodists, Quakers, etc. (I, 33–34). He sees all who share in the same free-church and/or believer's church ecclesiology to take part in this identity. However, this creates an issue, as the identity becomes vague and porous. Many Baptists (and others in this identity) are quite Reformed in their theology and do see themselves as in line with the Reformation.

This also implies the following questions and concerns about the porous nature of the baptist identity (which have already been stated in Chapter Ten): (1) If some Baptists insist on their Reformed identity (and in fact many do), they must be appreciated as a part of the baptist identity. This makes the three distinctions that McClendon offers (Protestant, Catholic, and baptist) highly porous. (2) While McClendon unites baptist identity around certain ecclesial characteristics, baptists share many convictions in common with Catholics and other Christians.

James Leo Garrett, Jr., writes,

Baptists have adhered to the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines formulated by the first four ecumenical councils and expressed in earliest Christian creeds. They have shared with medieval sectarians and reforming groups antiascetical, antisacramental, and primitivist intentions. They seem to have been indebted to various magisterial Reformers: Luther for the supremacy of the Scriptures over tradition; Zwingli for a memorialist understanding of the Lord's Supper; Bucer for church discipline as essential to the true

church, and Calvin for predestination as a major doctrine. Continental Anabaptist influence can most clearly be seen in believer's baptism as constitutive of a truly ordered church, church discipline as necessary, the New Testament as superior to the Old Testament, and religious freedom for all humans. English Separatist influence can be most accurately identified in terms of humanity's Adamic disability, the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the priesthood of all Christians, and congregational polity. Independency left its imprint on the earliest Particular Baptists through its Dortian Calvinism and its congregational polity.²²

McClendon aims for a new level of inclusion and cooperation amongst different churches as a practical test of their own catholicity (as he defines it), yet he goes on at length to define an identity that splits the Christian identity up further from just Catholic and Protestant. The baptist vision creates a type that bears a tension between the distinctive nature of the baptists and the concern for full inclusion of all Christians.

3. This implies that a conviction cannot be argued as a part of a group's identity purely because it was espoused by one historical group or individual in that community's broader historical identity. Anabaptist convictions cannot be inserted on the basis of McClendon's ecclesial definition, but neither can Baptist convictions be maintained purely because they are historically Baptist. Complying with the criteria of the baptist vision set out in Chapter Three, a conviction has to comply with Scripture, with Christocentric logic and practice, within a community listening to the leading of the Spirit. Thus, it must be understood that McClendon's Anabaptism was not adopted nor recommended on the basis of historical connection, but on this scriptural and Christocentric basis.

4. There is a conundrum in that while Anabaptists are historically connected to Baptists and share many convictions, they also have a history of disagreeing and disassociating from each other. The fact that the Baptists disassociated themselves from the Anabaptists is not

²² Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 21–22.

adequate grounds for dismissing the identity, as many Baptists do not even affirm other Baptists (and there are Anabaptists that do not affirm other Anabaptists). However, this only brings the problem of fragmentation in the baptist identity to the fore. That Anabaptists and Baptists are parts of the same baptist identity is demonstrable; however, the question as to the inherent division within the identity needs to be answered.

Conclusion

Thus, the Anabaptist-Baptist connection is complicated yet hopeful. Analyzing it is like untangling knots of intersecting theological convictions, historical claims, and practical prescriptions. However, at the very least, the baptist identity has some historical plausibility (although far from perfect), but the relevance of that history is far from obvious. The “baptist” identity is intended by McClendon to build a better, more cooperative and unified future. Yet, as this appendix confirms and as McClendon recommends, the “baptist” identity cannot merely be prescribed on the basis of history.

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Abbreviations for On-Page Citations

BT *Biography as Theology*
CV *Convictions*
BR *Baptist Roots*
MGS *Making Gospel Sense*

I *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume One*
II *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume Two*
III *Witness: Systematic Theology, Volume Three*

CW1 *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Volume One*
CW2 *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Volume Two*

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